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WIDOW CHUAN

THE WIDOW CHUAN-

The Widow Chuan, which is designed as a companion piece to *Miss Tu*, is a short novel with boisterous vitality. The story tells of a day in the history of a small Chinese village—a day of speeches, jollity and feasting to celebrate the return of the local War Hero. The chief character is a vivacious and wicked old widow, a law unto herself, whose presence dominates the community. Indeed, the village is bursting with rowdy and explosive characters, each and every one engaged in some public, private or illegal activity.

With its host of characters and multitude of plots, *The Widow Chuan* amounts to an extraordinarily vivid picture of Chinese village life—sympathetically observed and drawn with a delicious sense of fun.

Also by
LIN YUTANG

MY COUNTRY AND MY PEOPLE
THE IMPORTANCE OF LIVING
MOMENT IN PEKING
WITH LOVE AND IRONY
A LEAF IN THE STORM
BETWEEN TEARS AND LAUGHTER
THE VIGIL OF A NATION
GAY GENIUS
CHINATOWN FAMILY
MISS TU

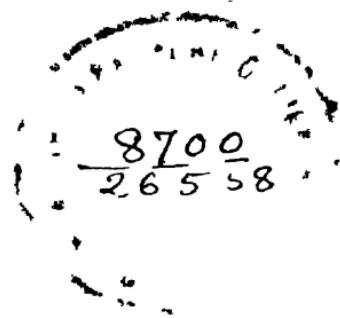
WIDOW CHUAN

Retold by

LIN YUTANG

based on Chuan Chia Chun by

LAO TSIANG



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INTRODUCTION

This story is one of the best Chinese novelettes that I know. I have chosen to translate and rewrite it because reading it was a memorable experience for me. I have been thinking, however, that presented in English dress, the background of this story must be more striking to Western readers than to Chinese readers, for it reveals Chinese institutions and manners and morals.

Widowhood was an institution in Chinese social life—when a woman chose not to kill herself after her husband's death, but chose rather the longer and harder road of bringing her sons and daughters up to maturity in poverty, by self-denial and self-discipline until perhaps a son came out on top in the imperial examinations and became a minister at the Emperor's court, as was true of the mothers of many famous men in history. Chastity in women was very much admired by men, particularly by the Confucian scholars, who respectably took some professional entertainers for their concubines and wrote poems about them. So far so good in the Confucian system. Our “Widow Chuan”, however,

had nothing to do with chastity; she was a personality, and if she was an institution in the village, it was against all that Confucius ever taught and believed. At least to the widow, Confucius was a fiction, she was life. She had to make the best of her life, with or without Confucius.

PREFATORY NOTE

THE AUTHOR of "*Widow Chuan*" is Lao Hsiang (his real name is Wang Hsiang-ch'en). He and Ho Yung and Lao Sheh (author of *Rickshaw Boy*) are three friends and writers in a class by themselves. Being all from Peking, they write in the local Peking dialect with a precision rarely equalled by other Chinese writers, and are distinguished by their pithy and earthy humour, characteristic of the men of Peking. Lao Hsiang grew up in Hopei, I think in Tsohsien, and he knew what he was writing about in this hilarious picture of life in a northern village. I loved especially "*Hullo*" Chuan and asked him (in 1940, when his story was published by my magazine) if this was a real person. He said of course he was real, and the widow too; and her daughter Tientien Ni'rb. I believed him. I thought no one could create such characters entirely out of imagination. The glory that attached to "*Hullo*" Chuan because as a railway worker he had something to do with a foreign engineer and had dug tunnels was a legend of monumental proportions in his village. Certainly "*Hullo*" Chuan never wanted his fellow villagers ever to forget it. But you cannot help loving him and loving the human and wicked and capable, hearty widow, who could twist the

village elder around her little finger, and her swearing, brawling, flirtatious daughter Tientien Ni'rh. I am much concerned lest the reader should miss the full flavour of this name. Ni'rh is a dialect word for a girl, and Tientien suggests a woman who has learned the stripteaser's gait, or who shakes her hips when she walks—that is, who employs any mode of walking except the ordinary and unromantic. Her name should be pronounced as if it were spelled dyandyannee'rh, with a quick, loving accent on nee, followed by a kind of Scotch trill.

I regard this story as one of the best creative works of modern Chinese literature, better than Lusin's "*Ah Q*". It is the presentation of the life and characters in a whole village, on the realistic side as a humorist chooses to see it. Here we have a conglomeration of cheats, gamblers, smugglers, and licentious, unfettered, uneducated, loud-speaking women and girls, very much deglamourised, so to speak. The author shows so much hidden affection for his character's that the story is not even satirical in intent. It is written as an honest and sometimes rollicking piece of human life, with no moral at all. It covers essentially one day following the return of a war hero to his home village, with many cutbacks to the past of the characters. I have had to adapt the text in a good many places and to omit some minor incidents for better continuity.

WIDOW CHUAN

I

ONE-ARMED Captain Chuan, dressed in European clothes and riding a giant water buffalo, was returning to his village, which he had not visited for some years. He was Captain Chuan "Big" Wu, air-squadron leader, and what was more important, a war hero. While still a few miles from the village, he heard a thunderous uproar of voices and a terrific din of gongs and drums and tin cans, indicating that there was a tremendous ado about something. He thought the whole village had turned out to welcome him. He decided to get down from his buffalo as was proper out of respect for his ancestral graves, and because great mandarins in imperial days always came out of their sedan chairs for the same reason. He would not be outdone by the mandarins.

People generally knew that National Hero Chuan had lost an arm and the four fingers of the other hand when machine-gunned in aerial combat, first because the loss of an arm was easily noticeable, and secondly, because he had a habit of sticking out his big thumb in appreciation of so many things which in his view were "tops". According to his own

story of the aerial battle, why, the enemy had literally plucked out his heart, and dropped it bleeding into the air. The government did its best to show appreciation of such inveterate veterans, and permitted him to enter a Home for the Disabled, where he would be pensioned for life. The people, too, agreed that he was a hero, a national hero, and deserved it. But he himself was dissatisfied. He did not mind living on a pension, but to be an inmate of a Home for the Disabled was incompatible with the dignity of a war hero. He wanted to carve out a career for himself yet. He wanted to go everywhere to search for his heart which the enemy had jettisoned so carelessly; when he recovered it, he would be of service to the nation again. His slogan was: "Search for your heart and save the nation."

In the opinion of the government and the people, the Captain had never possessed a heart in the first place—or more correctly, he had never possessed a mind. This is clearly proved by the fact that he often dozed off in the pilot's seat and landed off schedule. His defence was that his mind was absent. It was further argued that even if he had possessed a mind in the first place, he must have lost it while taking a cat nap at the wheel, and that the story that a Jap in another plane had, with his very hand,

plucked it out of his chest, was without foundation. Besides, if that were true, how could he remain alive? But they were willing to waive the point. The fact remained that he had lost an arm and four fingers for the country. To say the least, it was a sight awaking sympathy and the government had thought fit to give him a free permit to roam the country at will without let or hindrance. That was exactly the proper thing for the government to do in recognition of his services.

That was also exactly what Captain Chuan wanted. At first, when he received the travel permit, he was visibly excited. Then he thought again; it was both incompatible with his status as a national hero and inconvenient for a man who claimed to have lost his heart (or mind) to show too much emotion. So that mood passed. But he did think it right that he should provide himself with a proper outfit before his departure. It would be unbecoming to go about with an empty sleeve, whether in Chinese or European dress. Besides, at the ferries and stations, the porters like to make fun of a helpless cripple, and the more he stuck out his thumb, the more he invited laughter. He decided that the best thing to do was to have an artificial arm.

In this modern age one can control and guide

even a plane entirely by a mechanical robot. So the providing of a mechanical arm should present no difficulty. But the makers of artificial limbs made a fuss about individual needs and different professional requirements. For instance, all a wet nurse would require in an artificial arm would be one designed for holding the baby; a postman would want an artificial leg designed not for running a hundred-yard race, but only for long, plodding, camel-pace endurance. If a locomotive driver were fixed up with a wet nurse's arm good only for holding babies, and possibly darning socks, the chances were ten to one his train would be derailed. Captain Chuan was scientific minded and fully aware of this. He would look round first, then decide what he wanted. He went to a specialist.

It should be noted that since he became a war hero, he seldom went out, and when he did, he put a veil over his face like foreign widows. This was because whenever the boys saw him they would salute him. Their intention, he knew, was not entirely honourable, but was to force him to return their salute and to see his fingerless hand for themselves. This time, even with the protection of the veil, a young apprentice recognised him as he entered the shop, and took that advantage of him. Can you blame the stars for shunning public appearances?

The young apprentice led him to the showroom and explained the different models to him. There were so many kinds! The leg models alone were in profuse variety: pneumatic legs, feather-filled legs, ring-framed legs, hook-jointed legs, and metal-framed legs—no less than seventy or eighty kinds. The most elaborate, made of the best material, guaranteed that its wearer could run hundreds and thousands of miles without fatigue and without discouragement; it was labelled “leg for the electioneering stomper”, who would have appropriate use for it. As for arms, the most popular kind was called “the helping hand”, especially the right arm. There was such an enormous demand from so many people who wanted to lend a helping hand or be the right arm of some big shot in the government that a whole factory was kept busy night and day just turning out this special model. The Captain’s eyes rested on a model called “let me shake your hand”, because he was convinced it would be most useful for making friends when he went to the parks or influencing people while strolling in the streets.

He therefore had his arm restored, and as his legs were indubitably his own, born of his mother’s womb, he felt now that his four limbs were complete, and with an overcoat on, nobody could say

that he was deformed. He was satisfied. As he looked at himself in the mirror, he knew the moment had arrived when he could return home in the capacity of a war hero. He decided that before he went on a tour to "search for his heart and save the nation", he would first visit his ancestral home. It was entirely in consonance with the spirit of Chinese tradition that the home should come before the country. But of course, technically, he would be "going home to pay respect to his ancestral graves". The newspapers came out with an announcement that War Hero Chuan was going home to do just that.

This reminds me that I must mention the place of his nativity. He was a native of Hopei, born in the village of the Chuan Clan, which went by the very felicitous name of "Chuan Chia Fu," or "Chuan Clan Prosperous"; as "Chuan" means "entire", the name conveys the happy meaning of "Entire Clan Prosperous". It was a good sounding name, too, such as would in the course of time produce a national hero. If you look at the map, you see that the village is easily reached by land or water; a river runs to Tientsin, a railway connects it directly with Hankow, and highways lead off in all directions. Captain Big Wu could have used any of these means of transportation, except the aeroplane which

could land only at Paotingfu. But he would not take a train, or a boat, or a horse, or a sedan chair. He especially purchased a giant buffalo from southern Kiangsu and chose to travel home in this leisurely and poetic manner. If some other person had done this and ridden a water buffalo in European dress, he would be accounted downright insane, or at least feeble minded. But our War Hero always had unique ways of doing things.

We meet him therefore in this somewhat fantastic accoutrement on his triumphant return, as he was just outside the village.

It was May and the wheat-fields were ready for the harvest. The farmers have a phrase, "to fight for the harvest", meaning that when the harvest is due, all hands must turn out, men and women, without a day's delay. But it so happened that just at this juncture a locust pest had descended upon the village of Entire Clan Prosperous. There were an average of at least three locusts to every leaf and blade of the corn and wheat. In dismay, the village elder had sounded the village bell and called out the entire clan to stop the harvest temporarily and fight the locusts first, by frightening them away with gongs and drums and a general hullabaloo. In such an emergency, there were not enough gongs and drums to go around for everybody. Frying pans,

basins, foreign tin boxes, classroom bells, old water pails, the sounding stone of a convent—anything and everything that could produce a noise was put into action.

It was exactly at this moment that the Captain reached the outskirts of the village and entered the scene.

As has been mentioned, he had already come down from his buffalo, and he thought that the whole village had turned out for his triumphant entrance. Very much touched by this expression of welcome and thinking that he had done too little for his village, he restrained his tears which were in danger of rolling down. He would go round shaking everybody's hand with the lone thumb on his right hand, and say, "How d'ye do." He would use the polite form *nn hao* of Peiping, instead of *ni hao*, and he practised saying it seven or eight times.

Some years ago the inhabitants of the village had heard that Big Wu had become a squadron-leader, and had staged five theatrical shows to overawe the people of the neighbouring villages. They had boasted that the clan luck was good, that the sites of their ancestral graves had been well chosen. "Under a big tree you enjoy its shade; under a big official's shadow you never fade"—so runs the proverb. With such a distinguished son of the

village to fall back upon in case of need, everybody in the village put out his chest. Later, the villagers had heard the bad news that their distinguished son had died in battle, and it even was reported that someone had seen his coffin and his son in mourning. Public opinion changed, and the people discovered that they remembered "Little Wu" with his small monkey mouth, from which they had known all along that he would come to a bad end. His title "Big Wu" was given him when he had become squadron-leader. It was further established that the view from his father's grave was quite ordinary. They sighed at the news and felt gratified inside. On this day, when they were busy fighting the locusts and saw a curious giant buffalo approach (rarely seen in the north), they expected least of all to meet one who might be good riddance if he were dead, but who, if he were still living, was after all a Captain of the Air Force and a national hero, to be treated with all due respect. Some older peasants were rubbing their eyes to determine his identity, when a few young men cried out, "Why, if it isn't Second Uncle Chuan himself!"

Captain Chuan was unbelievably modest. He first made a profound bow to the entire group of villagers and clasping his own hands, made a circling motion which served as a greeting to all present. He was

just extending his big lone thumb to shake hands with everybody when he saw that the young men had turned around and begun to run back, calling to everybody, "The locust fight is off! Second Uncle Chuan has returned! Harvest work is off! Second Uncle Chuan has returned!"

In a short moment, Captain Chuan and his buffalo were completely encircled by a crowd of men and women and children, five or six deep, "water tight," as we say. They were verifying for themselves the fact that this distinguished son of the Chuans was still living and, what was just as amazing, had not even lost an arm in battle. A man of destiny, they agreed, was under the invisible protection of the gods, and would come out unharmed from any situation. Many of the children's eyes were directed at the Captain's necktie, which bore a physical relationship to the rope halter of the water buffalo. They were beginning to understand that, perhaps by tying the buffalo's halter to his necktie, he would have his hand free to swat gadflies off the buffalo's back. But, the children thought, why didn't he get a regular horse-hair fly-swatter?

Captain Chuan had meant to be very courteous and friendly with everybody. But now face to face with this crowd of village simpletons, uncultured and uncouth, he did not know what to say. He was

offended by their smell of perspiration and his brows knit. The farmers, far from being conscious of this, went up very close to him, asking him questions out of a lively interest in his welfare. Some old women put out their hands to touch his brown leather shoes and examine his white shirt, and came dangerously close to causing a dislocation of his artificial arm. Luckily, however, the village elder gave the order that they should escort the Captain to the ancestral temple, with the same drums and gongs which had been used for fighting locusts.

In a moment, the music started and the thunderous procession moved. The locusts, who had been interrupted in their dinner and then had enjoyed a lull, heard the noise, flew up to take a look, found that it was not for them, and settled down to continue their meal. The Hero felt that this procession with the music of drums and gongs, simple and primitive as it was, was much more enjoyable than a march behind the brass band of the Air Corps. (At a wedding and at Buddhist incantations, the principal thing is the noise.) True, the crowd did not march in step, but with the hubbub and the dust kicked up by the tremendous crowd, it was very impressive indeed.

The ancestral temple, which was to be the Hero's official headquarters, was a new one, built with the

Hero's own money when he had been promoted to squadron-leader, as he considered the old temple no longer worthy of his ancestors, already demonstrated to be capable of producing illustrious sons. The architecture and furnishings, though elegant enough, were the usual kind. What differentiated it from the richest and most luxurious ancestral temples, or temples of any kind whatsoever, was a marble monument to a dog. And of course every dog has a tale. I must now inform the reader of this dog's tale.

From a child of three, you can foretell his middle age, and from one of seven, you can foretell his old age. War Hero Chuan had been unusual even in his childhood. In his first year of school, when he had learned the meaning of the characters on a door sign opposite his home, "Imperial Historian's Residence," which was that of *hanlin* Liu (probably dead a century ago), he wrote three characters, "Big Hero's Home," bigger than the characters opposite, on a white piece of paper and pasted it on his own door. He did not mind the taboo that white was the colour of mourning. Once on New Year's Eve, the rice jar in his home was empty, and he was sent by his mother to borrow five dollars from his maternal uncle. (Kind reader, please remember he had a maternal uncle.) With the five dollars he

went to the market, but he did not buy rice. He came home instead with two big bugles, blowing them on the way. These facts had at first been taken as evidence that the child would one day become a ne'er-do-well, but after he had turned out to be a government officer, they provided proofs of an unusual personality, such as marks all great men's childhood. This monument to a dog was a record and a reminder that the hero was somebody to be reckoned with now.

For on the occasion when Chuan Big Wu had been promoted to squadron-leader he had returned home. The village Elder, Chuan Fang-chou, still thought of him as a fatherless boy who had once come to borrow rice from him on New Year's Eve, and who still owed him three loud banging kow-tows on the floor. He had not fully realised that this successful young man was now a different person, who did not think much of an old crusty fool who wanted to impress others with his authority on the sole strength of his age. The two did not get along. All great heroes, history tells us, have their special loves; some love a good horse, some a fine sword, some a woman, and some a dog. Our hero's special pet was a female dog of foreign breed, said to have come from the United States. He had given her the name of "Kweifei", after the historic beauty, and

had brought her home with him. She was twice as big as a Chinese dog. She was fed three pounds of beef and one pint of milk per day, in addition to fruit and vegetables. Chinese dogs could not even dream of such sumptuous food. Even the Elder himself, who had reached the age for enjoying the best food and clothing according to Mencius, did not eat so well as this foreign Kweifei. This enraged him and one day, out of spite, he saw a chance to egg his own fat yellow chow dog into a fight with her. Now a foreign dog might be good at eating beef, but when it came to a fight, she was not a match for the Chinese canine. Besides, during the scuffle the Elder got in a blow with a stick, and Kweifei was wounded and lay bleeding.

Of course, when Captain Chuan heard this, he was furious and felt deeply offended. Putting to good use his skill in diplomatic dealings with foreigners, he sent an ultimatum to the Elder, enclosing a certified description of Kweifei's wounds, and making twenty-two demands (that is, one more than the infamous Twenty-one Demands Japan made on China). Meanwhile, he sent Kweifei to a hospital in the city, where she received a prophylactic anti-tetanus injection. Whether the doctor for human diseases made a poor veterinary surgeon, or it was written in the book of fates that Kweifei's

time was up, we do not know. Anyway, within two days the Great Hero's beloved pet was carried through the "Peace Exit" of the hospital and straight to the gate of the Elder.

The Elder did not know that when crows cry bad luck is nearby. In his patriarchal tone, he asked the young captain what he meant by carrying the dog's corpse to his gate, and said that he was disrespectful to his superiors, that he could not succeed with this sort of blackmail. But the Captain asserted that this was a criminal case, and even if he did not want to bring the case to court, the public prosecutor would have to do so. He further pointed out certain statutes specifying that the murder of a dog was subject to the same punishment as murder of a man. Knowing nothing of the new Republican laws, the Elder began to be a little frightened. But he was sure that in his position as a village elder, he would not have to pay with his life for killing a dog, even though it was a foreign dog, and he would not be intimidated. There was a deadlock. Our Hero then issued a public poster on the gate of the ancestral temple, asking the entire population of the village to evacuate their homes within twenty-four hours and concentrate at the ancestral cemetery grounds northwest of the village, for he was going to fly an aeroplane and bomb the Elder's house, but wished

to spare the lives of the innocent neighbours. The villagers knew well that Hero Chuan was a man who meant what he said and they came to the Elder's house, blaming him for causing this trouble. They decided on the Elder's behalf to erect a monument to Kweifei as an apology to the Captain. The Captain had at first insisted that this monument should be erected outside the Elder's gate, for the Elder's convenience in offering sacrifices at the proper seasons. Only through the intervention of all concerned did he finally give his consent to having the monument erected at the new ancestral temple.

This time when he came home again, his first act was to pay his respects to the dog. He read the inscription composed by himself:

You are a dog,
He is also a dog;
· You know you are his equal.
I am a man hero,
You are a dog hero;
Two heroes stand side by side.

He felt profoundly moved. The Elder, now in a completely submissive mood, asked why he had not secured another foreign Kweifei, and Hero Chuan replied with sorrowful sigh, "A good dog is as difficult to replace as a good man."

The Elder now accompanied the Captain into the parlour of the temple, together with some who wore the long gown on occasions, that is, those qualified to keep the home-coming hero company. "A successful man remembers his own villagers," and the Captain had recently come to understand the elementary rule that "neighbours are all equals". He was not haughty, but was friendly, and kind to everybody. But the inescapable fact remained that he was now a famous man, and whatever he did was considered unusual. All the local inhabitants seemed to have lost half their stature in the presence of the hero, and hustled about to pour him tea and see about the dinner, like the little monkeys in the popular story trying to offer the Monkey King the berries and nuts they had picked from the mountains. Immediately, they sent Chuan Fei to town to order a feast from the Tunghsin Restaurant. The honours of personally serving him were not shared by the perspiring crowd standing packed inside the gate, but they thought even a glimpse of the man of destiny would ward off evil and bring luck for a couple of years. They had forgotten all about the locusts and had left their sickles behind, almost as if with the arrival of the man of destiny, the locusts would decide to quit the village by themselves and the grain would roll into the granaries of its own

accord, not knowing that half of the famous men in history brought to the people only misery and unrest.

“Locomotive Hullo” Chuan, a busybody, was late in coming, and do what he could, he could not push his way inside the gate. This made him so impatient that his bald pate oozed a shiny moisture.

“Hullo Chuan,” said the bystanders, making fun of him, “why don’t you use your locomotive energy and try to drive straight in?” But Hullo Chuan was a good-natured person and did not take offence.

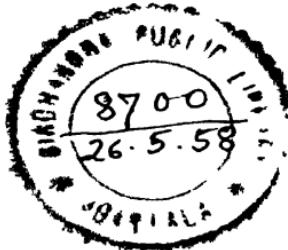
In this region around the Chuan village, Hullo Chuan was the first man ever to shake hands with a foreigner, and the only one who could talk a few words of English. The reader will understand of course that anyone who has dealings with foreigners at once gives himself a foreign name for their convenience. His name “Hullo” was such a foreign name, like John, Paul, and Wellington. The story was that he was christened with this name when he was working as a foreman on the Chengtai Railway and a foreigner handed him a shovel and said to him one day, “Hullo, Chuan, this is for you!” The foreigner continued to call him “Hullo, Chuan!”

every time he saw him. The name stuck, and the workers thought it sounded beautiful. It had become fashionable to imitate foreigners. When he had come home after the railway was completed, he used to tell his neighbours about his experience in building the railway, how he fired dynamite and dug tunnels. When it came to telling of the explosion of the dynamite, he always covered his head with both hands, as if the flying rocks were going to crash down on him. Then he told of how he went up into the mountains to kill tigers and knife snakes, in an endless stream of words accompanied by vivid gestures, ending always with a reported comment of someone, "Hullo Chuan, you are wonderful!"

According to his story, the digging of a tunnel was the most difficult part of building a railway, but it was his speciality, which had compelled the admiration of the foreigners. He was most proud of this point, but to his listeners his adventures in the mountains were more interesting. One day, he said, he had walked into a tiger's cave, and just as he had climbed up a tree to escape, he saw hanging down from a tree-covered cliff a huge snake which began to coil around his body. Had he not had the German knife in his pocket—why, he would not be living now! He impersonated himself in the stories of adventure which he had heard from the foreigners.

Even Captain Big Wu had first heard of foreign aeroplanes in his boyhood from Hullo Chuan.

Hullo Chuan was now over fifty, but he was as energetic as ever. He would not admit that there was anything he could not do. It stands to reason that for a person who had dug two hundred miles of tunnels, as for one who had bombed the enemy as a squadron-leader, nothing was impossible. The more difficult a task was, the more anxious he was to try his hand at it. For this reason, the villagers had found that the best way to make Hullo Chuan do a thing was to say that he could not do it. Sometimes he understood their sly purpose and replied, "No ginger (pep talk) for me," but down in his heart he was afraid they might think that he really could not do it, and so he undertook it after all. One year at harvest time, in the evening, a terrific thunderstorm broke out, threatening to ruin the cut grain. Everybody gathered in the servants' quarters of the Elder, very much concerned about the stacks of freshly-cut wheat which still lay in the fields. One and all urged Hullo Chuan to go out and cover up the wheat with grass mats. He went out into the storm. Perhaps the image of a locomotive had come back to his mind, for as soon as he came out of the village, he began to dash ahead, as if he had been transformed into an express train.



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But he forgot to watch the signals and see whether the switchman was at his post. It happened that Chuan Fei, a salt smuggler by profession, had also seen the storm coming and was dashing home from the oppsoite direction. One train was leaving Chuan Chia Fu and the other was coming toward it, and the two trains met head on, collided, and fused into one mass. Both persons lay stretched on the ground, derailed. Hullo Chuan was shorter than Chuan Fei by about an inch, and his head buried itself against the nose of the other. All they remembered was a lightning flash and a terrific crash. When the storm was over the villagers found the wreckage, they discovered that Chuan Fei's nose was made of softer substance and had been bent inward by the human locomotive. Henceforth, Hullo Chuan received the additional nickname of "Locomotive Chuan".

When Captain Chuan was attending a middle school at the prefect city, it was Hullo Chuan who took him to the railway station far away. Firstly, Hullo Chuan had more time than others, and secondly, he was thoroughly familiar with the ways of the innkeepers and ferrymen who might otherwise take advantage of the boy. Within a radius of fifty miles, the name of Hullo Chuan was well known as that of a bald-headed, talkative, old ex-foreman who

made bubbles around his lips when talking and who smoked perpetually. All the street entertainers, magicians, and owners of bear shows were his friends and depended upon his help in getting business for them.

He was not married and therefore had no child of his own, but he was a great lover of children. What was more, they loved him too. All the children of the village called out "Hullo Big Express" when they saw him, even though some might be technically one or two generations his junior. He would lift a child off the ground, or put one over his head, and advance crying, "Make way! The President is coming!" According to him, every child might be a future president. Or he would crouch down and blow a mouthful of smoke into their faces, saying, "Look! That is artillery. Bang!" The children, hit by the artillery, would at once snatch away his tobacco pouch and pretend to throw it into the mud. Then he would act frightened and beg them to return it to him. As a condition for returning it, the children would compel him to tell them the story of how a leopard once blocked a railway train. If he was not busy, he would tell them stories of opening mines or digging tunnels. Even when he was busy, before he got away he would imitate for them, with his hand

covering one cheek, the street cry of the Peiping goldfish hawkers. To be able to please and satisfy the children every time was indeed as admirable an accomplishment as digging a tunnel. When Captain Big Wu was a child, Hullo Chuan appeared to him a thousand times more important than the school-teacher.

Because he was such a success with children, the women also liked him. I should include the men also, for who does not like a person who makes it his business to help others at the expense of his own time and energy? He was independent and, being a bachelor, was the ideal person to busy himself with other people's affairs, and this was exactly what he loved to do. He would go to see somebody whom all the others ignored, or undertake a task which everybody shunned. When the village was putting on a theatrical entertainment, the most difficult job of the manager, the one surest to offend many people, naturally fell upon Hullo Chuan. When a drought was on, and a prayer for rain was to be held, who would lead a group to go out and steal or stir up the Dragon King?* Of course, Hullo Chuan. Who would go and visit Chuan Fei in prison and bring him food when he had been caught smuggling? Of course, Hullo Chuan, again. When Tientien-

* Usually a three-inch fish in some old well.—T1.

Ni'erh gave birth to an illegitimate baby, and someone had to take it out and bury it secretly, it was again Hullo Chuan. He alone could make a group of self-encased individuals come and work together as a team, or had the patience and the will to try to straighten an unwelcome, nasty affair.

Hullo Chuan was therefore a friend to everybody, rich and poor alike. But the most extraordinary thing about him was that he had two dead-set enemies. The first one was the Elder, who liked to snub and bully the villagers on the strength of his family position, and was hated by all. This was a case easy to understand. But Hullo Chuan's being always and completely at odds with his own brother was something which nobody could explain. In the eyes of the other people, his younger brother, however stupid, was at least a simple, honest farmer, certainly better than the smuggler Chuan Fei. But Hullo Chuan could drink and make merry at the same table with Chuan Fei like two fast friends, while the moment he saw his younger brother, his eyes seemed to burn. His brother's door faced east; therefore he must change his to face west. If a pedlar came along and he saw that his younger brother had bought from him, then he would have nothing to do with the pedlar even if he needed to buy certain things. Sometimes when he saw his

brother coming toward him in the street, he would turn back abruptly or make a detour. It is even quite probable that he chose to remain single, just as a form of protest, because his younger brother was married. If there were two possible ways of writing the surname Chuan, he would have gladly changed the character for his. The saying that it takes ten generations of a feud between two persons in their previous lives for them to be born as brothers seems to hold true in the case of Hullo Chuan and his brother. However, he was very fond of his younger brother's child, and once his brother's dry sarcastic remark, "However you love him, he is my child," hurt him very deeply.

Since his brother had made a separate entrance for his house, Hullo Chuan lived entirely alone. Whenever he went out, he locked his door and left his house guarded by an old black dog. After his meal, he always went out in search of something to do for others. He was busiest during the farmers' idle seasons. He fetched a big-drum storyteller here and a string musician there, or bought firewood for the neighbour in front or rice for the neighbour at the back. Back and forth he went, seemingly never tired. But there were also times when everybody was busy and he would do nothing instead and take his rest. For instance, during the harvest

rush, with everybody trying to do ten days' work in one, he would on no account break his habit of visiting the village fair which was held every five days. He usually would not miss the fair even if he had nothing to buy there, but went around asking the prices of various goods for his own information and took a good look at the shop where a foreigner was selling *The Gospel according to St. Mark* before he was satisfied. Then leisurely he went home.

On this day, he was coming home from the fair when he met Chuan Fei carrying a basket to buy food for a wine feast and so he first learned of the arrival of Hero Chuan. At once he dashed to the ancestral temple as fast as he could, but arrived, as we have seen, unfortunately too late.

Perspiring all over his face, he pushed and jostled and tried to elbow his way in, but those he pushed said, "Hullo Chuan, spare your breath. This is not a mountain. Don't dig a tunnel here!" He had bought a bunch of garlic at the fair, and by way of reply he thrust it in the face of anybody who did not like being pushed. In spite of this, after he had made his way to the Dog Monument inside the gate, his progress came to a stop. He felt like the Monkey Pilgrim who went through eighty-one horrors on the way and still could not get a glimpse of the Buddha. Hullo Chuan was exasperated beyond

words. Suddenly he caught sight of the water buffalo, tied to an elm tree near the Dog Monument and staring in great wonder at the crowd of pushing and puffing and perspiring men. At once he hopped on the buffalo's back, and waving what was left of the garlic at Elder Chuan, he cried, "Second Uncle, it is time to feed the buffalo. May I take charge of it?"

When our Hero saw Hullo Chuan, he was greatly delighted and was just lifting his hand to greet him when his artificial arm, being too tightly screwed at the elbow, struck a teacup, and it fell and drenched a big spot in his foreign trousers. While the people around him rushed to wipe the spot for him, the Elder turned around to Hullo Chuan and bellowed at him, "Where have you been all this time? You always hang around when we have no need of you, but when we do need you, you are completely out of sight. Take the buffalo and feed him properly. If anything happens to him, I shall hold you responsible."

"Don't worry. Leave it to me," replied Hullo Chuan happily. He did not at all mind being scolded. As long as he was given something to do he was happy. "Make way!" he cried, leading the buffalo, with a bunch of children following him. As soon as he had come outside the gate, the sudden

explosion of a string of firecrackers went off directly in the path of the buffalo. The noise and fire and smoke were enough to frighten a dummy buffalo, let alone a real one. The buffalo broke away, however hard Hullo Chuan pulled, and stampeded straight ahead, throwing down at least thirty grown-ups and children, and escaped to the outskirts of the village. Hullo Chuan, followed by a large group of farmers, ran after him with a great hue and cry, which caused another upset to the locusts who had been quietly eating their corn and now flew up again in considerable numbers.

To let off a string of firecrackers is a common matter, but to frighten away the War Hero's water buffalo was an event of no small consequence. Hurrying out in great anger, the Elder sent someone to find out where it had gone. He demanded, "Why, how did it happen that the firecrackers were let off just at the moment when the buffalo was reaching the gate?" The Elder appeared ill-informed here, for in many places the ancient custom of "welcoming buffaloes" is still kept, the reason being that the buffalo is a productive animal. But the Elder had good reason for being anxious. For he thought, if he had had to set up a monument for killing a dog, how many lives would have to be paid for it if he should lose the Hero's buffalo?

But when he learned that the person who had let off the firecrackers was no other than *Ancestor Widow Chuan*, his full blast of anger collapsed like a punctured bicycle tyre—it flattened completely.

3

The Elder had good reason to be confounded when he learned that the firecrackers were let off by *the Widow*, nicknamed “Topping All Westgate” and more humorously and respectfully referred to by the villagers as “*Ancestor Widow*”—quite the most forceful personality of the community. Because the Elder was a man and the Widow a woman, it does not follow that in a contest of strength, or of wits, or of words, the woman had to run before the man. No, not in this village while the Widow was living. Quite the contrary! Being a woman and a widow, she was willing to let the Elder maintain his outward semblance of authority as long as he did not step on her toes, and the Elder knew her too well to do that. The difference between the two heads of the village was that one was temporal and the other was spiritual. The spiritual head always knew where she stood, but the temporal head did not and was never sure of his ground when he was confronted with her. Moreover, our home-

coming Hero might sit in the ancestral temple as the brass idol, causing other people to do things by doing nothing himself, as all idols do, but our Widow alone could make the village happy because she was active and understood men's desires. The War Hero was silent like heaven, the Widow procreative and teeming with life like the earth. She did not mean to frighten away the Captain's water buffalo; she had even ignored the Captain's triumphant return because she had important things of her own to do. But the water buffalo, being an animal and therefore more sagacious than man, knew, when he started to run away, that the village was by no means run by his master the Hero. The Widow came to the square to let off strings of firecrackers because, while others were fighting the locusts, she had been holding religious ceremonies to propitiate the god of pestilence.

“Gossip hangs around a widow's doorsteps.” The old saying still holds good today. Whenever people find a moment free, they like to watch what is going on inside a widow's house, determined to find something there to keep idle tongues busy. When a woman becomes a widow, the best thing for her to do is to cover her face and weep all day, for the moment her eyes are dry, she is strongly

suspected of smiling, and that of course would show that she is living normally like any other person. It would be best also for her not to eat anything at all, for if she shows a preference for sour or spicy foods, she is at once suspected of expecting a baby. One must admit there are more people who like to cheat helpless widows and orphans than who desire to help them. Otherwise, how could a healthy woman ever think of killing herself? Generally speaking, a widow's life is not to be envied. But generally speaking only, for Ancestor Widow Chuan had absolutely nothing to do with all this tradition. Her only fear was that not enough gossip hung around her doorsteps.

The Widow was born of a city family, her father being a "civilian bailiff" in charge of serving summons and arresting offenders of the civil law, as distinguished from a "military bailiff" in charge of catching thieves. Therefore from her childhood she had studied and come to know the human animal well. She knew that the more timid and afraid of trouble a person is, the greater his chances are of running into it, but if a person stands up and fights, he can always get what he wants. What countryfolk, especially women, fear above all things is to be involved in a lawsuit or having anything to do with the magistrate's *jamen*, but to her this was

like eating bean curd, giving no work to the teeth at all. After her marriage to a cousin of the Elder, she gave birth to five daughters one after another. When people made fun of her and compared her to a broken-down kiln which could not turn out good bricks, she replied that this was entirely a misrepresentation of the true facts, that, in fact, when she was in her maiden home before she was married, she *had* given birth to a boy, except that it did not bear the name of Chuan. She said this as a joke, defying all comment, although her listeners knew that in her maiden home she was not one who tried to save lamp oil by night. She never tried to cover up the fact that as a young girl she was known by the rather flattering and by no means unromantic name of "Kai Hsi Men", or "Topping Westgate".

According to the story, except on her wedding day, Topping Westgate never spent a night quietly in her own earthen bed. She was sixty, and the gambling dens and tea-houses were her favourite resorts. In the matter of cards and dice, she was a past master and invincible foe for anybody, and no one would ever think of putting anything over on her. Chuan Fei, for instance, that salt smuggler and cardsharp who cheated many gambling friends, would stop cheating if the Widow merely flickered an eyelid. Sometimes after a raid on gambling

houses, the games would be played in a thick grove on the hill or in a field completely covered by tall corn, but she inevitably found her way there. When others were arrested by an officer, she would be let off with a laugh and walk away undisturbed. She was thoroughly familiar with the thieves' argot, and when she was not gambling, she could be seen sitting in an open teashop at the square discussing the affairs of the world, not forgetting to keep an eye on all the passers-by. Consequently, there was nothing in city or country life that she did not know, no gang and no profession with which she was not familiar, and no one with whom she could not engage in conversation.

Her one big regret was that she had never been to school and could not read or write. "If I had been born thirty years later, and had got hold of a girl student's skirt, I would not be afraid to be the Queen of the United States," she once bragged. Was she not the "Queen of Westgate"? However, for the three daughters of Elder Chuan who were college girls she entertained no respect at all. She would remark openly in the square in front of everybody, "After having been to school, they are still so shy, so ill at ease in public."

This was her opinion, for when the three girls came home for vacation, she would ask them after

the first greetings, "Tell me, how many men friends do your woman principal and your women teachers live with?"

Or, "You girl students are grown up now, and on Sundays you must have gone to places—let us say, to have a good time. I won't believe that you didn't."

Questions like this are not found in textbooks, and except her own daughter, Tientien-Ni'rh, who could hit back as quickly as he mother gave it, all other girls would fail naturally at such an examination.

Her own five daughters were never ill at ease in public. With the single exception that they had never lcd a nudist parade, there was no kind of "freedom" which they did not fully enjoy. Four of them were married. One died when she tried to practise birth-control by abortion, but the other three were all separated from their husbands and living gay and very enjoyable lives of their own. The youngest, Tientien-Ni'rh, was now between eighteen and nineteen, and therefore of presentable appearance at temples and village fairs and of interest to the village dandies. The young fellows of the village saw a flower growing out of a broomstick and went for her as ants go for honey, their way made easier by the fact that both the mother and

the daughter were followers of Mocius' Doctrine of Universal Love. So, unlike other widows and their orphaned children, there was smoke in the chimney of the home of Topping Westgate every day. Hullo Chuan, Chuan Fei, Little Root, and Little Tiger were all their followers, and it would not be incorrect to say that there were not many men in the village who were not contributing supporters of the Widow's club.

The old fellow, Elder Chuan, had strong ideas of his own. He had refused to cut off his queue after the revolution, for instance, and of course he greatly disapproved of the Widow. However, even before he was subdued by War Hero Chuan, he had been completely crushed and flattened under her feet, like a maple leaf after frost. He had first come into open conflict with the Widow when he saw that she had no son and had wanted to force her to adopt a child of the clan, and she had refused. Then there were some questions of property and debts decades old, which eventually must go to court since no settlement was possible. Elder Chuan thought that, with his knowledge of law courts, he would have no difficulty in winning against a woman. At the worst, he could accuse her of being an "unchaste and immoral widow" and could bury her alive first and talk about it afterward. He had forgotten that the

age of patriarchal authority had passed. Even the Emperor could be done away with when the people said they didn't want him.

Elder Chuan had fixed up a wagon with a new blue cloth cover for the journey to the city to sue the Widow. The Widow locked up her house, and bringing Tientien-Ni'rh along with her, appeared just as the Elder was starting, and with a full-smiling face demanded to ride with him. Calling the Elder by his personal name, she said, "Cousin Fang, I believe you are going to town to enter a suit. The court cannot try the case unless the accused is there also. So I thought I had better come along with you, and it will look better, too, to outsiders. Your niece is too young to go on foot twenty-five miles to the city."

She begged and wheedled the old man, and before the Elder could make up his mind the mother and daughter had already clambered up on the wagon. All the way, she talked of fish when crossing a river and of tigers when passing a forest, and appeared as excited over the trip as if it were a holiday trip to visit a relative. With the thought of the lawsuit hanging heavy on his mind, Elder Chuan was irritated and mortified and so angered that his face blanched. Tientien-Ni'rh, on her part, was a worthy daughter of her mother. She began to

flirt with him, calling him "Uncle, Uncle," and tried to make him promise to take her to see a *pangpang* show, a kind of popular entertainment with a lot of low dancing and high flirtation.

After arrival in the city, the Widow insisted that he should stay in the same hotel with her, the accused. As soon as they entered the door of the hotel, the Widow shouted, "Hey, everybody, come and meet your auntie! Prepare a lunch quickly, for this old brother of mine is hungry. I will be the host today." She began immediately to order wine and the menu for the dinner. The waiters saw that it was Topping Westgate and exploded in hearty guffaws, throwing back their heads characteristically. The Elder did not know what to do, feeling completely out of place and helpless, sucked into a vortex by the Widow's forceful personality. When dinner was served, the Widow at once poured a cup of hot wine for him, and then spoke as calmly and casually about the lawsuit as if she were discussing the affairs of a third person.

This dinner-table oration ran as follows, "We are brother-in-law and sister-in-law to one another, and nobody has been murdered. What are you taking this up to court for? I advise you to enjoy your dinner and at once drive your cart home. Life in the city is expensive, and I don't think you would

like to stay long. You go home like a good boy and tell Auntie not to forget to feed my yellow dog. I am going to remain a few days longer with this windbag niece of yours, for her to renew her acquaintance with her cousins in the magistrate's office, and get their protection so that nobody will think of bullying her later. To tell you the truth, I cannot guarantee the outcome of a lawsuit because I am not the magistrate myself, but if anyone says I may lose, he is talking rot. But of course it depends on whom I have a suit with. You are my husband's cousin, and I am your widowed cousin-in-law, and there is no point in either of us winning a suit against the other. I thought that you were excited and there was no use talking with you at home. That is why I have taken the trouble to come all this way with you. A mind is like a block of wood, you have to drill through it before it can think clearly. Now I am talking this over with you frankly, and if you like, with a laugh we can become friends again. People say that sometimes farmers come to the city to bring a case to court, but when they see the image of the Kweihsing god, the devil kicking a bucket, they always change their minds and go home. I think you are changing your mind now. You have three daughters who are not yet engaged. If we ever appear against each other in court, you

know this mouth of mine is not dependable and I don't make a prepared speech. Just in case it makes a slip and says something unpleasant about the virtue of your daughters, I shall feel badly toward their mother. Your daughters are attending college and want to be properly married, don't they? I certainly would not want them ever to blame me for being a silly old fool who lets her tongue run away with her. Now you are a man, and have worked your way up to village elder. Go home and maintain your dignity as an elder, while I stay a widow, and live my widow's life. You go your way and I go mine. Whom does a lawsuit benefit but the magistrate and his underlings? It simply does not pay. Ashes are after all hotter than dust, and if I as a widow have blemishes, you would want to cover them up for me. This is all I have to say. The case will be withdrawn on my initiative as the accused, and we can consider it settled. But if you prefer to go ahead, please do. We, mother and child, will stay here a waiting action. My nephews here will take care of my board and lodging and you don't have to worry on my account at all."

The Elder's grandfather had been a *chujen*, a scholar of second degree. As one brought up in a gentry family, he was not unfamiliar with law court procedures, and was usually quite self-confident and

capable. But when he heard this forthright speech by the Widow, its open threats untempered by mercy, he was at his wits' end. His face paled and a cold shiver went down his spine. Of all things he could imagine in this world, he was most afraid of the Widow's "unprepared speech". There is a popular story to the effect that a professional boxer was once felled by somebody in a theatre crowd and beaten until his face and nose looked like a swollen cabbage. People asked him why he did not use his professional skill to defend himself, and his reply was that there was a dense crowd and not enough room for him to swing against his opponent, and besides the other fellow did not box according to orthodox tactics. The Widow certainly did not follow orthodox tactics in this case, consequently the Elder was profoundly regretful that there was not enough room for him to swing his arms. The net result was, that they fixed up the cover for the wagon again and rode home together to the village.

When the Elder's grandfather was living he was known to be an unusually stern disciplinarian. Once when he saw his one-year-old mule-colt kick his mother the mare, he burned with Confucian anger, stamped his feet, and shouted, "To think that a beast of a *chujen*'s family should be so lacking in filial piety!" He immediately had the colt taken to

the execution ground and crushed to a meat sauce under a stone wheat crusher. During the Taiping Rebellion, he kept a sharp watch on any stranger speaking with a foreign accent, and when such a supposed rebel was caught, buried him alive in the public cemetery in the west of the village. The Elder was not a *chujen*, but the phrase "bury alive" had become a regular part of his speech. What he would like to do with the Widow and her entire family was to bury them alive. But after due consideration, the courage to tackle the Widow left him.

The Widow once got together about thirty villagers to go and wreck the kitchen of the mother-in-law of her third daughter, and Elder Chuan had attempted to interfere, but he failed to stop a single one from carrying out the Widow's orders. He then clearly realised his own strength as against that of the Widow. Then, following the incident, Chuan Fei, that salt smuggler, had forcibly taken the Widow's third daughter from the home of her husband and kept her in his home. Should he or could he interfere? The Elder considered the question carefully. Hullo Chuan was a good person, easily coaxed to do anything, but he was a bachelor and all his winter and summer clothing was made by the daughters of the Widow. To ask him to turn against the Widow would appear to be more difficult than

digging a railway tunnel. The Captain, the home-coming hero, commanded prestige and influence, but we know that the Elder would be thankful if the Captain did not "bury" him "alive". As for the general run of honest farmers, they knew well that a murderer had to pay with his life ever since the laws of the Han Dynasty had been established, and certainly no one would think of taking his orders to "bury" the Widow "alive". Besides, to speak of his own family, his wife was a believer in the Buddha at the Widow's home and went to pray there for the protection of his family. His own son had an affair with a sworn sister of Tientien Ni'rh. It was unthinkable that his son would dare lift a finger against the Widow.

The result of this review of the general situation was that, in any fight with the Widow, at court or out of court, he was no match for her, and all he could do was to stay home and pretend to be deaf and dumb. And just because of this, the Widow would, when she felt like it, go up to his house, slap the table, and breathe out a stream of fire and thunder for his benefit.

In the opinion of the villagers, except for the fact that they did not quite like the long pillows in the beds at her home, they rather thought her a more useful member of the community than the Elder who

was good only for sitting at the top at a public dinner. I will not dwell on the point that in times of need, she was always ready and willing to help one in distress, but will only mention the fact that she possessed a special skill which made her useful to all expectant mothers, and she was the special saviour of those expecting women and girls who should not have a baby. Again, her fourth daughter was a clairvoyant who could see ghosts and spirits in broad daylight, and was accounted one of the most proficient students of the black art. The very mention of the Fourth Fairy was enough to shake Captain Big Wu's strong scientific convictions. Once she said to Elder Chuan, "Second Uncle, you should watch your steps these days. I saw two devil judges sitting on the ridge of your roof and debating for about half an hour. I haven't yet found out whether it is going to be good or bad luck." And true enough, in a few days his store of firewood caught fire, his barn was destroyed, and thirty thousand catties of newly picked cotton went up in smoke.

Another time, she went around the village warning the people from house to house, "Everybody should try to keep out of trouble these days. I saw a woman in a white dress walking into the village. I recited three incantations to drive her

away but without success." A few days afterward, Chuan Fei's real wife's body was found at the bottom of a well. Some people thought the woman died under suspicious circumstances, but it did not shake their belief that the appearance of a ghost generally presaged a disaster. Other homes had the image of a goddess, but the Bodhisattva in her home was a man, and moreover was made of wood instead of paper, and therefore always responded to prayers. The reason that everybody in the village took an interest in the Widow's family was not entirely because her family consisted of the "gentler" sex. In case of a drought, they went to her home to pray for rain; in case of sickness, for a prescription of medicine; in case of a bad dream, to ward off evil luck. The cultural centre of the village was decidedly not in the school housed in an old dilapidated temple, but in the Widow's home.

As has been mentioned, this morning the Widow was busy holding a service of prayer to the god of pests.

As the proverb says, "Look for the fish in the market when there is none in the river. There's more of them where they go than where they come from." In the village only the Fourth Fairy practised religious devotions the year round and had communications with fairies and gods and Buddhas

and fox spirits, but today all the monks and priests and sorcerers and sorceresses from the other towns had congregated there. Not one was absent; not one arrived late. It was quite amazing how these priests and sorcerers divided up their duties and conducted the ceremonies with better order and precision than any festival programme run by the villagers. Everybody was at his place, knew his job, when to attend to the incense, when to tinkle the bells, when to hum the prayers and stand up and kneel down, in an endless routine which they knew by heart. Nevertheless, the Widow was the general director of these activities, and the way she gave orders for sacrifices at midnight or for burning written prayers to the gods at noon compelled the confidence of the followers and the priests. The Fourth Fairy sat high up on a special altar, watching the appearances and expressions of the spirits in the air, and then announced the results of her vision. She would inform them that the Great Fairy was pleased with the height of the incense smoke, or the little devils were annoyed at the smallness of the offerings. As for the wildcat Tientien Ni'rh, she had no particular duty. She merely put on a pretty dress, flirted with Chang, made eyes at Li, and twittered and hopped about like a little sparrow.

At night, the house was solidly packed. The priests and their assistants then did their best. The gongs and bells and drums went into full play, the incantations were at their loudest, and there were dancers with flower wreaths, stringed bells, and torches, jumping and running and constantly changing to form files, squares, circles, in a dazzling display of postures and steps. One could not help believing that this was a dancing party; the only difference was that instead of young girls, the dancers were grey-haired, dirty-faced village hags. Toward midnight, the Fourth Fairy would spread a black cloth over the altar and order all doors closed and lights out and begin a spirit séance. Some famous spirit would descend upon the altar and talk directly with human beings instead of through a medium. It was exciting enough for young men and women to be shut up together in a dark room and hear conversations between human beings and the spirits, but when in addition, Tientien Ni'rh circulated in the crowd to play her little pranks in the dark, one had to admit that this was paradise itself.

What was hardest to believe was the fact that the Widow herself did not believe in the gods and publicly said so, although she made her home a house of worship. One should certainly regard an

open tea-house on a square as a public place, but she loved to expound her atheism there, somewhat as follows. "When a stinking dung beetle puts on an official cap the foolish people call him an official and address him as Your Honour. A piece of wood, if made into a threshold, is stepped upon by everybody. But when the same piece of wood is carved into a Buddha, it is said that whoever touches it, his finger will immediately rot. And you ask me to believe that?"

"I see why you have no Buddhas in your home," the tea-housekeeper replied by way of teasing her.

"To tell you the truth," rejoined the Widow, "I have living Buddhas in my daughters and you have one in your wife. We both live off their men friends."

The audience roared in laughter and the tea-housekeeper's face reddened and he went away to work his bellows. People knew well enough that his wife was faithless and that the Widows' daughters were "Goddesses of Mercy, Saviours of the Afflicted and the Distressed." But it took a person like the Widow to tell it herself.

"But if you don't believe in the gods, why do you keep an idol in your house?" asked Chuan Fei.

"Don't tell me that you don't know. What do you run a gambling den for? For your commissions.

So do I. I keep a Buddha in my house for the same reason a tea-house owner provides teapots, and for the same reason you keep your dice and cards."

Certainly she told the truth. Each time a religious performance was held in her home, the Widow received a great many contributions from the public. For these contributions she was responsible solely to Buddha himself and did not have to render an account to the public. For instance, three days before the prayers were to be held, Hullo Chuan, who was not particular about what he was asked to do, went about from house to house to solicit contributions of rice and cash. Those who could not afford these would give two eggs, but everyone gave something.

On hearing the news of the Captain's return, the Widow went on calmly directing the religious rites at her home. Chuan Fei's maternal grandmother Li Twist-Lip, was also a clairvoyant, and was yawning and swinging her body and dreamily giving a spirit's message to the audience. When she heard during her trance that Big Wu had returned, she immediately opened her eyes and hurried down so fast from her seat that her false hair almost fell down, without allowing time for the spirit to say good-bye and return to heaven. But the Widow grabbed her before she could get away.

“Where are you going?”

“To see my grandnephew. Big Wu has come back.”

“Go on! You can go a hundred and twenty miles to claim kinship with Big Wu and still you won’t succeed. Do you suppose he is giving away food and clothing or presenting you with a cypress coffin? No, you stay here and have a good meal of the monks’ food when the service is over. It won’t fill your stomach to go and watch others having their wine feast.”

“I can stay if you want me to. I am not anxious.”

She climbed up again on the earthen bed, closed her eyes, and began immediately to yawn and swing her body sideways and start talking the spirits’ language again. Luckily, she had forgotten to send the spirit away when she came down, otherwise it could not have descended to their presence so readily.

The priests and sorceresses heard the exciting news of Captain Chuan’s return and they wanted to join the welcoming crowd, for in the village the return of an air pilot was a rare event. When they saw that Li Twist-Lip had struck her hand against a nail, so to speak, and was abruptly turned back by the Widow, they at once raised the pitch of their incantations and tried to concentrate on the ceremonies. But Tientien Ni’rh ignored all this; she

knew that when a wind blew there was rain, and she slipped away. There was a big crowd at the ancestral temple, and where a big crowd was, there she must be.

The sacrifices to the god of pests completed, the Widow led her company to the square to let off some fire-crackers as the culmination of the religious ceremonies. She did not know that Hullo Chuan was just coming out with the returning Hero's buffalo. The confusion caused by the buffalo's stampede made the Elder and the others inside fume and collapse. The common judgment of the people in the street was, "Luckily it was our Ancestor Widow. Had she been anybody else, the fellow would have had to answer for it."

When a distinguished son of the clan returned to the village, inevitably there was an upset of the delicate balance of forces in the community. People who usually lived apart came together; some relatives became more important in their own eyes or in others' eyes. The Hero's very presence in the village meant that certain scheming minds would become active and ready for mischief, although the Hero himself might be entirely unaware of it and

sleep through his entire stay. Chuan Fei the smuggler had been sent to get food from a restaurant in town. He had been gone a long time, but he was also attending to certain matters of his own. In fact, the moment he saw the Captain return, his brains—for he had brains—became very active. He had offered himself to go to town to order the dinner.

Captain Big Wu sat in the ancestral temple waiting for his dinner, answering perfunctorily now and then some questions put to him. It was already noon and he was famished, but there was no sign of a meal yet. For a moment, in his reputed “absence of mind”, he thought he was in his own house, and he started to call for the cook that he might box the fellow’s ears, but the signboard opposite him with the four big characters “Chuan Clan Ancestral Temple” waked him up, and he checked himself. The guests next to him heard the tragic gurgle in his stomach and felt deeply worried. The Elder came out three times to see if Chuan Fei had come back with food, but there was no trace of him. He bought a dozen wheat cakes and oil puffs specially for the guest of honour and laid them before him. When the War Hero saw his dirty finger-nails his stomach revolted, and the oil puffs were left untouched. What were they to do? In desperation,

they sent Little Tiger to go and look for Chuan Fei.

There was just one cool moment when comparative peace was restored at the square, many of the villagers having gone off after the buffalo. At this moment, the wild cat Tientien Ni'rh thought fit to create some excitement, in accordance with the rule that the appearance of a great hero in history always presaged a general upheaval and social unrest.

It was like this. While the square was packed full of people, Tientien Ni'rh suddenly gave two loud slaps on a young man's face with one hand, while with the other she clung tight to the trousers band of the young fellow, which we might say was her way of "collaring" him. Booing and sobbing, she yelled, "Why did you touch my breast? We will go inside the ancestral temple and settle it before the elders. . . ." The barebacked, perspiring young fellow was so taken aback and abashed that he turned pale and speechless, while his hands clutched desperately at his trousers band which, from the girl's forceful pull, was in imminent danger of snapping loose. The bystanders tried to separate them, but Tientien Ni'rh refused to let go and repeated her accusation. Elder Chuan heard the commotion outside and thought there was a riot. He came out to look and found that it was his own farm-hand

who was being manhandled by Tientien Ni'rh.

Tientien Ni'rh was a worthy product of the great petticoat tradition of her mother. There was nothing she dared not do or say, no place where she dared not go, and no man whom she dared not see. Some evenings, she would, without a second's thought, go with Chuan Fei and some of the village youth four or five miles away to see a play. She was thin and not good at walking, but she could always ask the young men to carry her on their backs. She was already near twenty, but strange to say, those young men were perfectly willing to act as her pack animals and let her ride on their necks.

The farm folks looked down upon actresses and regarded them as little better than prostitutes. But Tientien Ni'rh had no scruples about going along with them and being affectionate with them like sisters. She could not act, but was often asked to take a minor role where no singing was involved. With the exception of the Elder, she was the only person in the village ever to ride in a wagon with a new cover. Her cousins in her mother's maiden family worked hard at weaving and yet could not afford to have a new pair of quilted cotton trousers in winter. But Tientien Ni'rh, who neither spun, nor wove, nor ever had a thought of the morrow, had a complete wardrobe for winter, spring, and

summer. As a matter of fact, her dress and appearance were the objects of much discussion and envy among the village housewives.

The Buddhist monastery, Kwanganshih, with about two hundred monks in it, was situated in a grove about two miles west of the village. Tientien Ni'rh often dressed prettily and went up there to gossip and prattle with the monk in charge of reception. She would stay until she was asked to leave. Once she asked the monk, "I hear that it is your abbot who taught the nuns the secret of securing an abortion. Is that true?" This was beyond all bounds of decency, and the monk pulled a long face and said to her, "I must beg you not to come to this holy place and talk such nonsense." She was offended, and when she next showed signs of a growing waistline, she told everybody that it was due to the "carelessness" of the monk. In human society, anyone who speaks ill of some person is likely to be believed. Besides, an affair between a monk and a woman was by tradition almost taken for granted, and the girl had told it herself. The monk quickly sought peace in Heaven, and that was where he went.

What she loved most was to get into something, create some excitement when there was none. At a theatre she did not watch the play, but always took

note that some young man was looking at her or smiling at her. When she came to the square, happily bobbing and weaving among the men, she wore nothing except a suit of pyjamas, and a flaming red blouse, of a most disturbing colour, which would have provoked the War Hero's buffalo, let alone the village young men. If nobody touched her breast, her breast would touch somebody anyway. But to pick on that honest farm-hand and accuse him was patently a gross injustice.

Regardless of what the truth was, the Elder was enraged when he saw the young fellow miserably handled and subdued by a girl. In his opinion, he should have torn her blouse to shreds, or still better, should have killed her with one fell stroke. He forgot that he himself had once retreated from a woman like a beaten dog with his tail between his legs. In his fury he aimed two powerful kicks at the pants' seat of the poor labourer. Luckily, the Widow came to the scene just at this moment, pushed the Elder away, pulled back Tientien Ni'rh, and with a broadly smiling face asked the farm-hand to go away. Turning round to scold her daughter, she said, "You saucy brat! The idea of pulling at a man's trousers in front of everybody! If others are not ashamed for you, are you not ashamed of yourself? We, mother and daughter, never expect to

have a chastity monument erected in our honour in this life anyway. So why act coy as if you minded being touched? Why didn't you stay home like a young lady? Who told you to come here and jostle and duck and get crushed by the menfolk? Don't you see how you have frightened him? Go home, you brat!"

Then she turned and said to the Elder, "Go back and wait on the Hero! You shouldn't have bothered about this childrens' quarrel."

Who would have thought that a threatening thunderstorm could clear up in a moment by a few words of the Widow? If it had not been the poor farm-labourer, but the Elder's own son who was involved, he might have had to erect a stone monument in honour of Tientien Ni'rh for her heroic purity in resisting assault.

To know where the dinner was coming from, we have to go back to the water buffalo. When the animal took fright, he ran all over the fields without any aim or direction as if his tail had caught fire. Perhaps, being a water buffalo, he wanted to find a cool pond where he could immerse himself, but there was no pond, not even a ditch, in this wheat-growing region. "Come back! Don't run away!" cried Hullo Chuan after him. "We are going to have a theatre show." Whether the buffalo under-

stood him or not, he ran still faster, thinking perhaps that if there was to be a festival they might want to kill him for a sacrifice to Confucius. Locomotive Chuan, after all, was feeling the effect of his age. He was no longer the young man who used to train for running by binding sandbags as weights on his ankles, or who used to run a five-mile cross-country race with the Frenchmen when he was working on the Chengtai Railway. After he had chased the buffalo for about a mile, he stopped and merely stamped his feet, and finally stood still. The latter, seeing that he was not being chased any more, also came to a halt. The animal saw a well near-by, but evidently decided that, though there was water in it, the well kerb was entirely too narrow for him to go through. Besides, he also was out of breath and preferred a rest. At this exact juncture, Chuan Fei's group appeared and blocked the buffalo's path. There were Chuan Fei, the Captain's maternal uncle who was a horse dealer, Little Tiger carrying a basketful of meat and vegetables, and a restaurant man carrying prepared food. Somehow the buffalo gave up the flight and followed them home.

“Jade Emperor of Heaven! Omitabhal!” Hullo Chuan exclaimed, as if both the Taoist and the Buddhist gods had been responsible for the animal's capture.

"You've been away a long time," said Hullo Chuan to Chuan Fei when the latter came up with the animal, while he hugged the animal's neck and kissed him, saying, "Well, well! brother buffalo, we are good friends, huh? I shall give you a big feast."

It was true that Chuan Fei was gone a long time to get the food. The villagers knew well that the Captain had a special hankering for spicy foods, and would most enjoy a dinner with all five flavours complete—salt, sweet, sour, bitter, and hot. These had to be bought and prepared specially. Chuan Fei's mission therefore included a visit to the Salt Bureau and to see the second daughter of the Widow who was kept by the merchant. The salt smuggler and the proprietor of the government Salt Bureau had something to talk about in whispers, during which Chuan Fei found a chance to slip a package of pure salt, unmixed with sand, into his pocket. Then he found time, when the merchant's back was turned, to exchange a few satisfying winks with the second daughter before he left the salt shop. Vinegar had to be obtained from the dyer's shop, because the dyer from Shansi had three-year-old vinegar. Then he went on to buy eight bitter melons, six catties of green pepper, and some brown sugar. It was all complete then, except for the garlic.

The special weakness of the War Hero for garlic was well known to the villagers, because he had eaten it and loved it since his childhood. Sometimes he would wake up in his sleep, and feeling a craving for garlic, would take some from under his pillow and have one or two bites, enjoying it more than Tientsin pears. Whenever he felt out of sorts, or had some small ailment, garlic was his cure-all. After he became an air pilot, garlic was his indispensable food. He claimed that eating garlic prevented a pilot from feeling giddy while turning a somersault in the air, but, according to him, this was a national military secret which must be kept from foreigners. As for going to a public place with a big crowd, it was regarded best to fortify oneself with one or two bites, first for driving away any possible infection in the air, and second for driving away people. Everybody would rise and offer him his seat and back away politely. Just an hour ago, as the Captain, developing a headache from the close smells of the rustic crowd, had been delighted to see Hullo Chuan standing on the buffalo's back and waving a bunch of garlic. Unfortunately, in his exultation his arm had hit and overturned a tea-cup, and in consequence he had missed the chance of tasting his favourite delicacy. To make the story short, Chuan Fei knew that unless he came

home with a bunch of garlic, he might as well not have gone at all. But at harvest time few farmers sold garlic in the market and, besides, all the good garlic of last year had been sent to Tientsin and only some of poor quality remained. He had made a special trip to a farmer's garden, and persuaded the farmer to allow him to pick some fresh from the garden, which accounts—partly at least—for the long delay.

The fact was, when Chuan Fei offered to go to get food, he was going on a mission of his own, concerning a matter which required a great deal of cunning, forethought, and careful execution. It was this matter which formed the subject of a whispered conversation between the salt smuggler and the proprietor of the government Salt Bureau. The fat proprietor's face oozed a smile and his eyes rolled while he listened, as if Chuan Fei were his prospector and had come back to report secretly about striking a gold mine. After getting his scheme going, he met Little Tiger in town and informed him that his father had been arrested by the Salt Bureau. Little Tiger was shocked. He only remembered that the night before his eyelids had twitched, which was a bad omen, but he could not believe how it was possible for his father to be mixed up in smuggling. His first instinct was to go

at once and see his father, but Chuan Fei stopped him. Chuan Fei wanted to wait a while to be sure that illicit salt was found in the possession of the man marked out for arrest. "I advise you to go at once and beg the Elder to intercede for your father. He does not know the proprietor himself, but his son's father-in-law does. If you go yourself, you may be locked up, too, and sent to jail with him, and there will only be Little Root to look after your mother. Don't get excited. Be prepared to spend some money and your father will be freed. What is money for except to be spent when the need comes? You certainly won't want to save money and see your father go to jail."

When an ignorant farmer runs into trouble, he is as helpless as a pig on New Year's Eve waiting to be slaughtered. To Little Tiger, Chuan Fei seemed to be giving good, helpful advice. He had always thought Chuan Fei a cheat and a swindler and had tried to avoid him. Now as he listened, he felt greatly touched. Of all the people in the village, Chuan Fei took the trouble to tell him and give him advice.

Chuan Fei next went to see the maternal uncle of the Captain, who kept mules and horses for hire, and tried to persuade him to come and see his nephew. As a horse dealer, he was considered well to do. When he was informed that his distinguished

nephew had returned, his eyes narrowed into slits on his long and unemotional face, said by his enemies to resemble the animals of his profession. He had done something that had estranged the Captain from his mother's family, and they had not spoken to each other for years. He wondered if the Captain still hated him for preventing his mother's burial, but it was long ago now, and if he and the Captain were reconciled, how important he would look in others' eyes! What made him hesitate very much to go into the village was that he had made himself an enemy of the whole clan by his behaviour in that incident. He would be stepping into hostile territory for the first time in years. Chuan Fei had good reason to try to persuade him to come, as part of a well-conceived plan. He personally assured him that he would be coming as his guest and under his protection, which was saying a great deal. The horse dealer knew that Chuan Fei was somebody in the village, feared by the average peasant. Moreover, money was money, and the horse dealer came along with him on a matter in which they were both interested.

While on the way, the maternal uncle gave Little Tiger a still more clear-cut piece of advice, "Stand up like a man. Don't look so miserable, lest others see you." Little Tiger, it should be explained, was

given that name because as child he cried ferociously, but that was about the only resemblance between him and the second king of the forest. "This is a family disgrace," the maternal uncle continued. "It would have been better if it had never happened, but since it has, do something about it and don't be afraid. Just so, you regard it as if someone in your family is sick, and you have to call in a doctor, though it costs money. You know who my nephew is. By and by I will ask him to take up the matter for you. But you must prepare some cash. If you don't happen to have any on hand, try to raise some on your property. But get the money." Little Tiger again felt greatly touched by his sincerity and thankful for his counsel.

When they came to the village, Chuan Fei told Little Tiger to walk ahead and wait for a chance to speak to the Elder and added in a low whisper, "Don't say that it was I who told you about your father's arrest. Just say that you heard about it while in town. Act as if we had not met today."

Chuan Fei took the horse dealer to a tea-shop, and told him he would come and take him to see his distinguished nephew after the dinner was over.

"What are you doing here?" asked the tea-house keeper, when the horse dealer was left alone. His tone was cold and casual.

"To see my nephew who has come back."

The horse dealer felt ill at ease. He perceived in the tea-house keeper an attitude of suppressed hostility. Other people in the tea-house looked at him coldly and left him alone. Chuan Fei had told him that he wanted to find out first the Captain's present attitude toward him and prepare for his reception. He sat there for hours. Would the Captain still remember the old, old incident? He wondered to himself.

5

We have been somewhat long coming to the dinner, but that is because the dinner was long in coming, in fact overdue. At last it came. As the dishes had been prepared, it was necessary only to set them on the table, for the food did not easily get cold in this weather. As soon as the restaurant cook arrived, he put down his load and went up to give a greeting to the guest of honour. It was so gracefully done that it moved the villagers to remark, "After all, only city folks know how to do a thing of this kind." The cook began to set the entire feast on the table, consisting of four fruits and nuts, four cold meats, four big and four small dishes in a perfect four-four system. Those standing outside were

discussing the food spiritedly, and guessing that the cubes in a bowl must be steamed pork and the round things in another dish must be meat balls. The noise of this discussion annoyed the Elder who bawled at them and called them a vulgar lot. The crowd retreated a little, but grumbled to themselves. "Of course you want us to stand far away, because you have the right to sit at the table. If you were in our place, you would push closer than all of us."

When the table was laid, the guests seated themselves according to seniority, and so no time was lost in conceding seats politely to one another, as often happened. The Elder was starting to pour wine when to everybody's surprise and consternation, the guest of honour bent his head, directed his eyes downward, looked extremely solemn, and mumbled a string of syllables, like one suddenly possessed. The other guests exchanged glances, but in their great respect for the Hero dared not laugh or question him. Even the restaurant cook, a man of the world, was completely puzzled. Of all those present, only Hullo Chuan had been abroad and knew what it was. Standing outside the window, he told everybody that this was called *hsieh fan*, "thanks for rice," and that foreign devils loved to play this game. He quickly went on with a lively exposition of how Christians prayed and what they did at

church. His listeners, however, were too busy watching and discussing the big fish and the meat on the table to hear him.

When the guest of honour raised his head and opened his eyes, everybody thought they could now take up their chopsticks. But no, not yet! There were other rites to perform. He believed that rice and vegetables were given by God and therefore clean, but the vessels and chopsticks brought from the restaurant should be disinfected. He flipped out a small glass bottle from his pocket, screwed the top off slowly, and used two fingers of his artificial hand to take out some cotton balls soaked in alcohol. With these he wiped the plates, cups, spoons, and chopsticks one by one. This took a long time because the Captain was working with his mechanical arm. The guests, on their best behaviour, could only stare in silent distress at the progress of this work while on the outside even Hullo Chuan did not know what it was all about. Some essayed the opinion that the small glass bottle contained cocaine, another avowed it was morphine; anyway, the stuff was regarded with suspicion. After the War Hero had duly completed the disinfection process, the man from the restaurant, in a gesture of extravagant politeness, took his chopsticks and plates and gave them another wiping against his black, greasy apron.

before setting them down with the remark, "I know your honour loves cleanliness. I have brought this new set which has never been used." Fortunately, Captain Chuan's show of modern hygiene was for the others' benefit rather than for himself, and he did not go through the entire process of disinfection once more.

These preliminary rites over, the Elder, putting on a big, full smile, began to pour wine for the War Hero and for himself before handing the wine pot to the others. The whole table drank a toast to the War Hero and the latter threw back his head and emptied the glass in one gulp. As a rule, an air pilot should abstain from drink, for flying above the clouds gives one a heady feeling anyway, and a touch of alcohol might make his spirit so light that he would float above the clouds and never come back. But our pilot disregarded this. At a dance hall, he could match a cup with each one of sixty dancing hostesses, each drink specified to be of a different kind, which meant tasting the entire series of the wines at the bar one or two rounds. In addition, he was fond of the finger guessing game. Since he had lost four fingers, every time he stuck out his lone thumb, so it was no guesswork for his opponent. He was always beaten, which with his great capacity he really did not mind. He was at his

best when he was a little groggy and had lost his sense of balance. "I may not be very steady while on the ground," he said, "but once I am up in the air, my head clears immediately." His present listeners were inclined to believe him. Unfortunately they could provide only two kinds of wine; one was water mixed with wine, and the other wine mixed with water, both called *kaoliang*. Our War Hero knew that they had had no time to buy brandy from Peiping, and prepared to enjoy the dinner and made everybody happy by praising the local brew.

Many people hated to go through a dinner, but to the Captain it was an occasion for leisurely and refined enjoyment. He was at his best and liveliest at a dinner-table; directly he smacked his lips at the wine, he took up his chopsticks and attacked his food energetically and with impressive gestures, adding appropriate appreciative remarks about the freshness of the fish and the tenderness of the chicken. He followed the instructions of *Health and Hygiene Magazine* to chew each mouthful of food fifty to seventy times before forwarding it down his esophagus. It seemed to the guests that the dinner was going to last till midnight. Little Tiger, whose father was in danger and who was awaiting his chance to speak to the Elder, was burning up in impatience. The slow, up-and-down movements of

the jaws of the guests were hateful to him. He wished he could grab the heads of the guests in one hand and pour all the food on the table down their throats at one stroke. He further hoped that they would find a match or a hair or a toad in the food which would horrify them and terminate the feast at once. But this was all a dream. The War Hero did pick out with his chopsticks two cotton seeds and lay them side by side on the table and take a good look at them. But as his "mind" was "absent", it did not disturb him at all and the eating and drinking and finger guessing went on interminably. It must be said for the Hero and the guests that they had waited long enough for the dinner and therefore would not let go after it had arrived. And according to custom, the guests were not supposed to wipe their mouths and leave the table before the guest of honour.

There were no clocks in the village, and it is difficult to estimate closely how many hours the dinner took. At last all chopsticks were laid on the table. The War Hero then walked to a cabinet and took out a thermos bottle and a glass. He poured some boiling water into the thermos bottle and poured it out again to make a cup of Lungching tea. There was really no need for a thermos bottle in the month of May, and the boiling water did not

have to be poured into it and poured out again. He watched the tea leaves churning about in the cup and subsiding gradually like a pack of submarines then took a stalk of garlic and began to chew it slowly.

While so occupied, he suddenly remembered that distinguished sons on their visit to the home town should make inquiries into the "economic condition of the common man". He was now well fed and well filled with drink, and he thought he should show a deep interest in the people and see if they had anything to complain about.

With this in mind, he began to ask the restaurant cook about conditions in town. The man, who was removing the things from the table, replied, "It is not bad. But for the last years, the magistrate has banned theatre shows, and all business suffers. Just take the Spring Seeds Festival in February, for example. Because there are no theatrical entertainments and no big crowds, the big merchants are not interested in sending their goods to sell at the festival. Business is very quiet. With a theatrical show going on, you feel a sense of general prosperity."

"Why?"

Before the Captain had finished, the Elder seized the opportunity to give his view of the situation.

He had been waiting a long time to have a chance to say something. The mention of the festival gave him his chance, and he seized upon it to describe the good old days gone by, to support his general thesis that the golden age always lay in the past. What gratified him most was to be able to tell of the days of his own youth.

“In my time,” opened the Elder, “the Spring Seeds Festival used to be a great occasion when people from all five northern provinces sent their seeds to our town for sale. When you were a mere child—perhaps you don’t remember—the money collected from the people was more than enough to stage three shows going on side by side. The lumber section alone occupied hundreds of acres of land. The textile section spread out in several canopied alleys, with the stalls standing close on both sides. In those times too, the gods were responsive to prayers, whether for male progeny or for wealth, and religious pilgrims flocked to the place. Every room in the village was booked. The festival began on the eighth of February, but from the first of the month the town began to fill up with people. Professional entertainers, story-tellers, boxers, beggars, artisans, prostitutes, and people of every trade and profession swarmed to it. The managers in those days, too, were solid people and could make up any

loss and pay for damage to satisfy the public. Nowadays, the young fellows in their places can only create trouble rather than settle it, and merchants from other towns avoid coming. When there is no business, the shop people of course cannot contribute money for theatrical entertainments, and consequently there is no theatre. The young people nowadays are a stupid lot."

Unhappily for the Elder, the Hero was not listening, or seemed to be uninterested in all this display of history, and was visibly yawning. Without reference to the Elder's speech, he turned around and asked the restaurant man again, "On the basis of what law does the magistrate ban the theatre? What kind of a world is this when the farmers who sweat all the year round are not even permitted some relaxation?"

"Whack!" his palm descended upon the table, to the consternation of all the guests and the women and children outside. The stopper of the thermos bottle, already under pressure from the steam inside, suddenly popped up and shot a hole in the papered ceiling. Calm and undisturbed, the War Hero went on, "I say we should engage a theatrical company to come and give a show. We should have some recreation to ease the farmers' drudgery. Foreigners have Sundays, and that is why they work with better

efficiency on the other days. Do you know that?"

The guests nodded in approval, as they should, although they had never heard the word "efficiency" or "recreation"

Afraid of losing his chance to speak again, the Elder quickly put in his opinion. "There are reasons for the ban. Firstly, the crops are bad; secondly, the population is poor; thirdly, there are soldiers stationed in the neighbourhood; fourthly, it is difficult to maintain order. . . ." The style of this speech seemed to indicate that there had to be ten reasons to make it complete and impressive. The restaurant cook was bending his fingers one by one, but when he had counted eight, the War Hero's snore became intrusively audible. In consequence the Elder stopped short, and the last two reasons were never revealed.

The Captain had the habit of falling asleep in his seat, which will be readily understood, as we had occasion to refer to it at the opening of the story in connection with his flying. But it may have been due also to a conscious theory on his part. He had gone up into the air, and there looking down, had seen the earth from a new and different angle. Perfectly solid houses seemed to dance up and down, and rivers looked like strips of small white ribbons. He believed therefore that many human habits

could and should be altered for mankind's benefit and enjoyment. For instance, there was no a priori reason except human degeneracy why man should lie in bed to sleep. Apes are known to go to sleep hanging from a branch by their tails, and cormorants and other marsh birds go to sleep securely standing on one leg. It would be a great improvement if man could learn to sleep on his feet, which would obviate the necessity for undressing. Training himself to fall asleep in his seat was a middle stage looking to the ideal stage of sleeping on his feet.

The guests were convinced by his snore that he was fast asleep, when they heard him talking to the restaurant cook, "Very good—your wine is very good."

"Thank you," replied the cook.

Without opening his eyes, the War Hero continued, "I don't need any supper. I will go vegetarian tonight in memory of my foreign Kweifei. You can provide the same dinner tomorrow, but take care to boil the cotton seeds softer."

The instruction was immediately followed by another loud snore. The guests could not make out whether he was awake or was talking in his sleep, and neither dared to ask nor to laugh. This ability to talk in his sleep was also a special habit which the

War Hero had cultivated as a means to frighten away burglars.

6

When the Elder saw that the War Hero was not listening and had fallen asleep, he was sure that it would be no offence for him to withdraw from his presence. As soon as he stepped out of the hall, Little Tiger went up to him and begged in an excited tone, "Old Uncle Fang, please, my father went to market this morning and was arrested by the Salt Bureau. He had done nothing wrong as far as I know. Will you please help to get his release?" Little Tiger broke down crying. The sight of a grown-up crying so pitifully caused the women and girls who were standing around to shed tears of sympathy. For by this time the men had gone back to their fields and had been replaced by the women. The Elder Chuan eyed Little Tiger coldly, as if he had not heard or could not be bothered, and walked away with the impressive air of the gentry.

After Chuan Fei had left the horse dealer at the tea-shop, he had hurried home and talked with the so-called "sewing woman" in his home, who was no other than the third daughter of the Widow. He

whispered something in her ear, and she cried, "Heaven forbid! How could you!"

Chuan Fei answered merely with a smile and threw her fifty coppers which he had squeezed out of the purchases for food that morning. Puffing a cigarette with great satisfaction, he told her, "You must not tell anybody what I have just told you. I am going to the tea-shop. If your mother is there we will have a game of cards."

At the door he saw Tientien Ni'rh about to enter. He pinched her cheek and said, "What a beautiful red blouse! Your Daddy is just leaving."

Tientien Ni'rh gave him a sharp poke and said, "May your arm be palsied!" She had been feeling much put out since getting the public scolding from her mother at a time when she had just successfully created some excitement for herself and the crowd. In her boredom, she thought she would visit her sister and have a talk. No sooner had she entered the house than the third sister pulled her close and whispered to her, "I will tell you big news. Little Tiger's father has been arrested by the Salt Bureau! Don't tell anybody."

"Whatever for?" asked Tientien Ni'rh. "Why did they arrest him?"

"He had bought a sack of smuggled salt, which was discovered by the Salt Bureau."

“When?”

“Early this morning. Shih San-pao was carrying his load of oil puffs to the town, but someone found the salt in the drawers of his chest,” the sister said, as she went out to the kitchen to bring in some firewood.

“It does not make sense. If he had bought smuggled salt, why should he carry it to town?” Tientien Ni’rh’s big eyes stared in wonder.

“Don’t keep on asking me questions. Come and help me carry some firewood.”

“Pish! Don’t you see I am wearing my new blouse?” Her hands closed on the fifty coppers and she escaped to the street.

Li Twist-Lip was going to see her grandson, Chuan Fei, when she met Tientien Ni’rh outside the door. The latter grabbed her and whispered, “I will tell you something you must not tell others. Shih San-pao was caught by the Salt Bureau for selling smuggled salt this morning.” Li Twist-Lip wanted to ask for more details, but Tientien Ni’rh was already gone.

At this moment, Hullo Chuan was leaving the ancestral temple. He had watched the War Hero eating his dinner and, finding that he moved his jaws up and down like any other man, had decided to come away and attend to the water buffalo. At

the square he met Tientien Ni'rh who took him by the shoulder and whispered, "Do you know that Shih San-pao was arrested for stealing two bags of salt from the Salt Bureau? I am telling it only to you, so don't tell anybody." Before Hullo Chuan could get more details, again Tientien Ni'rh was on her way.

Through the volunteer news service of Tientien Ni'rh, the whole village knew in a very short time that Shih San-pao had been arrested. Some said that he was trying to sell smuggled salt, and others said that he had robbed the Salt Bureau. This was a great puzzle to everybody for they all knew that he was a simple, honest oil-puff seller who might offend sometimes by refusing to give credit to his customers, but who certainly would not do anything dishonest. They could not understand how smuggled salt was found in his possession.

In reality, however, when a man was arrested by the Salt Bureau, whether he was really guilty or not had nothing to do with the charge. When the official salt merchant asserted that someone engaged in smuggling, it might be a patent falsehood and yet there was nothing on earth the accused could do about it.

The country people have a saying, "It is better to own a salt shop than be a magistrate." For salt was

a government monopoly, and the prices were fixed by the government. The salesmen could insult the customers without fear that they might walk away without buying salt. If a customer complained that the scales were incorrect, the salesman would take a bowl of water and sprinkle water on the salt, and say smartly, "You see, now the scales are perfectly balanced." If a customer complained that the salt was mixed with too much sand, the man would say, "Well, as you like. You are not obliged to buy it. Go and pray to Heaven to grow some pure snow-white crystals for you alone." The villagers would not of course pray to Heaven to drop snow-white salt on their tables, but only that Heaven would grant them a constitution which could do without salt. If a farmer paid his tax and was willing to put up with insults and injuries without seeking redress in a law court, he could escape the magistrate's special methods of blood extraction. But on the hook of the salt merchant's steelyard every farmer hung a piece of his own flesh, and *that* he could not escape.

The villagers had never seen how the Emperor lived, nor did they hope to. But they did see and greatly admired the life of the salt merchant. The proprietor was a man with a round face and a round stomach, which indicated he was born to good luck. But his more impressive feature was a pair of

dark crystal spectacles, appearing as two black discs on a white fleshy face, suggesting two little devil's caverns which emitted a mysterious ray fraught with a magic power invisible to the villagers. Feasting, gambling, and opium smoking went on in his house, and he kept three or four women there the year round. The Widow's second daughter, nicknamed "Topping Five Towns", was a famous belle known all over the three surrounding counties. Many rich and powerful men desired to obtain her, but only the salt merchant succeeded. Every other trade and profession was affected by good and bad years, but the salt business, being a monopoly of a household necessity, was independent of God, men, and crops and made profits from year to year. If the proprietor wanted to take in some more money, say, to meet the expenses of his son's wedding, all he needed to do was to send out his patrol hawks and arrest some so-called "salt smugglers".

The land around Chuan Chia Fu was covered with deposits of salt phosphate. In order to make it cultivable, one had to remove the salt deposits, but to do so was immediately to violate the salt law. What was worse was that when an old village woman carried a package of salt on a visit to the neighbouring county, she could be charged with "illicit inter-county traffic". What usually happened

was that the three salted turnips and eight salted ducks' eggs in her possession were also confiscated by the salt patrol.

Chuan Fei was one of the head patrolmen, and he was known to buy up native rock salt and sell it openly in the neighbourhood. He carried a three-pronged iron implement, supposedly to be used for raking salt, but in reality as a lethal weapon in any encounter on the road. Except for the Widow who feared nothing in heaven or on earth, most honest people tried to avoid having anything to do with him. But if he came to your door and asked you to buy his salt, it would be dangerous and foolish not to oblige. The wisest thing to do was to be cordial, expressing your good will by paying more than he demanded for less salt, thus insuring yourself against possible disaster.

Little Tiger's father, Shih San-pao, however, was a stubborn and straight man, who did not know or care to know about such matters. He knew only how to save oil and flour in making oil puffs. Last year, near New Year's Eve, he saw no reason why he should not demand from Chuan Fei a settlement of account on oil puffs which Chuan Fei had taken during the year on credit. Now it was unimaginable that a person like Chuan Fei would admit owing money to anybody except to the King of Hell. In

the spring, Chuan Fei took half a bushel of illegal salt to Shih San-pao's home at midnight and told him that he was in need of money and had to dispose of it. Shih San-pao, induced by the cheap price, fell into the trap and bought the salt. It was inevitable that sooner or later he would be caught by the patrols with the salt in his possession.

About five years ago Chuan Fei had come out of gaol, and ashamed to face his neighbours, had gone to enlist in the Army. His mother alone and helpless, was forced to go begging for food. At that time the villagers would say to her, "It serves you right for bringing up a thief for your son." Later Chuan Fei wrote a letter home, saying, "I have been promoted to captain. From now on, Mother, you will enjoy a life of ease and comfort and will not have to skimp and pinch any more." The old beggar woman immediately rose in the respect of her neighbours. Some called her Auntie, others called her Mrs. So-and-so, and all were afraid that should they address her by a wrong nomenclature of kinship, they would be struck down by lightning. Even Chuan Fei's maternal grandmother Li Twist-Lip raised her head high when she came to the village, convinced that while her grandson's "thieves' star" might be bad, his "officials' star" was good. Apart from the promise in that letter, however,

they did not see any money sent home, and the mother continued to carry a small pan in her hand and beg from house to house. But the villagers no longer looked down upon her. They were distant to her, but treated her with proper respect. When Chuan Fei returned, it was not clear whether he had or had not been promoted to captain but he clearly wore a pistol strapped on his belt. What impressed the villagers most were two gold front teeth which shone when he opened his lips, a wrist watch, and also a dazzling watch chain. When he spoke about his exploits in swindling and in smuggling opium from Manchuria, he compelled the abject admiration of his listeners.

“A blockhead will never accomplish anything,” he bragged before the villagers in the tea-shop. “The business of smuggling opium from outside the pass returns a profit of ten thousand per cent. But it is gambling with one’s life. One has to go through a whole network of sentry posts and submit to search at station after station. I thought of many ways, but none seemed good. Then I thought I could successfully disguise myself as a knife grinder. I knew a lot of the slang of the profession, and really knew how to sharpen scissors and knives. So I bought a grindstone and a good solid bench, and travelled with that outfit, stopping wherever there

was a sentry station. I didn't care if I didn't do any business, but I got to talking with the guards. When I had got acquainted with the guards of a certain station and they knew me, I went on to another station. To make it perfect, I pretended to be a consumptive, coughing and panting while I talked. Those guards never dreamed that inside my bench and its legs were hollows filled with cake opium. I kept two kitchen knives which I used to sharpen when I had nothing to do. When I had need of them, they served as very good weapons. I could easily dispose of a party if there were no more than two or three persons."

"Have you ever been caught?" some of the listeners asked timidly.

"Of course. That was why I left. I killed one officer and two ran away." He smiled a happy, satisfied smile. The listeners were shocked at his wickedness, but took care not to say anything.

He went on with his heroic account of himself, "When I saw a country booby come along, God forbid that I should leave him alone. Once three of us, sworn brothers, were sitting at a tea-stall outside the South Gate of Hsuanhwafu. We watched the country folk coming into the city, and we could tell by just looking at them which ones had hard goods (money) on their persons."

"How could you tell if the fellow carried only a small amount, say, thirty to fifty dollars?" asked the tea-shop keeper.

"You are surprised? Well, wait until you hear this. We not only knew that he had it, but also the exact amount he had, without mistake. That was our business." Chuan Fei drank his cup of tea, while looking out of the corner of his eyes trying to determine from their facial expressions which ones had money at home.

The listeners had various comments.

"I have been told," said one, "that the footprint of one carrying silver dollars is heavier."

"No, that's not it," said another. "You look at the dust which is swept up by his heels. The more is swept up, the more money he is carrying."

"Please tell us," all begged him.

"As I said, that's our business. When you are sure the fellow is a greenhorn visiting the city for the first time, and know how much money he carries, the rest is easy," Chuan Fei said with an artful smile. "If you cannot take it by force, there are other ways, hundreds of them. The commonest way is to induce him to take your bag, then you go and search him, saying that your bag contains official documents. Or one of us would dress as a shop apprentice and pretend to have run away with money and beg the

fellow to keep it for him, promising him half of the silver. When he had taken possession of a package with imitation silver in it, the other two of us would come along and threaten to send the apprentice to gaol. The latter would then confess where the silver was, and after recovering it, we would still threaten to take the victim to court as a thief. Of course he had to pay up."

"Marvellous!" commented his listeners.

In short, Chuan Fei was a perfect crook who knew that the more wicked he appeared to the villagers, the greater respect he commanded from them, and the more they would fear him. That was why the Elder did not dare interfere when he took the third daughter of the Widow and kept her in his house. If a man was careless in his talk and made a disrespectful reference to Chuan Fei, a dead dog would be found in his well the next morning, or a ring would be cut around the tree in front of his house, looking from a distance like a sign that someone in the house had died.

When the people in the village heard that Shih San-pao was arrested, no one suspected that the whole affair was Chuan Fei's doing. They felt, rather, that the oil-puff seller, who wore greasy clothes and had big pockmarks on his face, did not indeed look like an honest fellow. Even his two

sons, Little Tiger and Little Root, looked to them like suspicious characters now. The Shih family was in disgrace. People would be able to walk freely over their garden or pick their vegetables without fear of retaliation. Surveying the house, they would say, "Look, very soon you won't see smoke coming out of that chimney."

But there was one exception, a man who did not stand aside and would take up the cudgels for anybody in distress. That was Hullo Chuan. After he had heard the news of the arrest, he retired to the cowshed and stared for a long time at the strange-looking water buffalo, as if the animal could help him think out some way of helping the Shih family. "Look here," he mumbled to the buffalo, "the divine cow in the story of 'The Cowherd and the Spinster' could think up wonderful ways of helping his master. But all you know how to do is either to drip saliva around your lips and look composed and satisfied, or else break off and dash around like mad. If I were not tired from chasing you all morning, I would have gone to town already to find out the news." He was as truly concerned as if it was his own affair. He thought to himself that a stubborn man like Shih San-pao would be shouting and raving in his dark cell, protesting against his arrest.

He was probably going to suffer for it, for salt patrols all had "boils on their heads with excretions running out of their soles", that is to say, were rotten through and through. The more Hullo Chuan pictured it to himself, the more he wanted to do something for the victim. He thought he could see Shih San-pao being suspended by a rope and whipped with a willow branch dipped in water. When he seemed mentally to hear the groans, all his muscles tensed, his eyes glittered, his forehead perspired, and with a bang he hit the philosophical buffalo a blow that caused the animal to see stars.

Hullo Chuan left the cowshed to look for Little Tiger. The little girls in the street called to him, "Locomotive, it's time to feed the water buffalo," but Hullo Chuan did not even look at them. The girls thought that something very unusual must have happened for Hullo Chuan, who had never disappointed children, to look so sullen and grave. Tientien Ni'rh waved to him from her doorstep, while the Elder's black dog sniffed at him. He gave a kick at the dog, which served also as an answer to Tientien Ni'rh. If someone had lighted a match on his bald pate at this moment, I am sure it would have caught fire.

He met Little Tiger at the ancestral temple and

learned that he had been rebuffed by the Elder. Without a word, he dragged Little Tiger out, like one of those chivalrous heroes in story-books. Little Tiger followed him gladly, since the Elder would not lift a finger to help him. Together they went to Hullo Chuan's home. The latter closed the door and windows, and said to him grimly, "If you are a man, you should take a knife and go and settle accounts with Chuan Fei!"

"With whom?" asked Little Tiger in complete surprise.

"With that bastard, Chuan Fei!"

"Why, with my Second Uncle!" Little Tiger's face turned pale. "He has nothing to do with . . . this morning in town . . . if had not told me . . . why are you. . . ."

"Be quiet. I will ask you only one question: If he is the man who caused the arrest of your father, will you dare to stab a white knife into him and draw out a red one? I am talking to you, assuming that you have some courage; but if you are born of a mouse, I shall not waste words on you."

Hullo Chuan drew a sharp knife from under his bed, a dazzling white chopper used for slicing water melons, and ran his hand along it.

"We are farmers," said Little Tiger, almost whimpering. "I shut my eyes when I see people kill-

ing a chicken, and you ask me to go and kill a man!"

"Ah, you, I don't suppose you have any guts in you." Hullo Chuan said.

"I am a farmer," Little Tiger persisted.

"Then are you willing to take the matter to court?" Hullo Chuan's tone showed disappointment.

"We cannot afford to. It takes money and influence to go to court. Our family has to live. You should not ask me to kill; one has to pay with one's life. And a lawsuit usually wipes out a family fortune. We are law-abiding citizens." Little Tiger protested very firmly to defend his inaction. Hullo Chuan's mortification was great.

"A scurvyed dog cannot be helped over a wall! I knew it. I knew you are a mooncalf that cannot stand on its own legs."

He took a long look at the knife and put it back under his mat. "Now don't stand there! The sight of you makes me dry up in anger. Remove yourself from my presence, you lout and go and buy a coffin for your father!"

Little Tiger had never thought that the kind Hullo Chuan would speak so harshly to him. He had been nearly frightened to death to see him brandishing that knife. When he was told to get out, he was all too glad to obey. But after he had left, Hullo Chuan relented.

"I was too rough with him," he said to himself. With a bent head he left his house, determined to go to the tea-shop and have half a catty of Shantung noodles with hot sauce. This was one of his favourite habits. Whenever he felt out of sorts and downhearted, he would say grimly to the waiter at the shop, "Well, I won't bother any more about others. I'll think of myself first. Give me half a catty of noodles, with plenty of sauce!" At such moments he thought all the people's noses and eyes seemed to have grown in the wrong places. Ignoring everybody, he would devour his food as if it was his very enemy, while mumbling, "What am I saving for? My younger brother's heart is turned against me, and my nephew cannot be my son. And others will still less listen to me!" But after finishing his food, all his anger would be gone, and then it seemed to him that every leaf and every flower, everything in the world, was beautiful. Then he would say to himself, "There is no use in being angry. Anger never helps, but only makes things worse."

But this time he saw Chuan Fei and the horse dealer at the tea-shop in a hilarious mood as if celebrating a triumph, and he was inwardly more inflamed than ever. He finished his noodles in one stretch, but did not feel better for it. When a man

remains angry after a full dinner, there must be really something to be angry about. Again he went to find Little Tiger. He thought this time he would be more tactful, in order really to be of help. What he did not expect was that as soon as Little Tiger saw him coming, he slammed the door shut with a bang, denying him entrance.

Little Tiger had returned home to find his family howling and weeping and cursing in great confusion. His mother had taken the occasion to berate his wife, "It is my bad luck to have a daughter-in-law turn her husband against his own mother." His wife, who could not answer a mother-in-law back, was grumbling, "My dog is to blame, and my chicken is to blame, and even the cat broke a bowl." Little Root was crying aloud, burying his head between his arms, and thinking of the family land which they would have to sell to raise money to get his father out of gaol. His property would be gone, and he would not be able to marry. It was all so tragic. This created a great hubbub in the house, resembling a frogs' concert in a pond at night, each complaining against the other and crying for some good reason of his own. It took a long time for Little Tiger to calm them down one by one, and then he recounted to them realistically how Hullo Chuan had shown him a knife and advised him to

commit murder. All four mouths broke out with a loud, "No!" each starting to talk and no one listening to what the others were saying. After a moment, his mother was heard to say, "Hullo Chuan once helped build a railway. He cannot be a good man." "You are not the only son of your father," his wife said. "Why should it be you, if someone had to do the killing?" And Little Root said, "Why did he ask us to kill? If he hates someone, let him go and kill the man with his own knife." Nobody was thinking now of how to get the father out or of who was responsible for this outrage. What they were thinking was that Hullo Chuan was a bad man with a wicked heart, and they agreed that hereafter they must ignore him.

Hullo Chuan had considered carefully what was the best advice that he should give Little Tiger. He had left the tea-shop with the full intention of outlining a course of action, and did not know that the Shih family regarded him as an enemy. Peeping through the slit in the door panels, he said, "Open the door. I have a way to get your father out." He heard the mother answer back angrily to the effect that Hullo Chuan had no family himself and wanted other families to become extinct also.

"Listen, Little Tiger," Hullo Chuan spoke outside the door. "Don't be angry with me. The important

thing is to consider how to get your father out. I have carefully thought what you ought to do. You shouldn't have asked the Elder's help in front of everybody. Even if he wanted to help you, he would have to say 'no'. I am older than you by a few years. You don't know that the gentry don't take up a matter like this at the outset. For instance, in a lawsuit, they wait until both parties are almost exhausted, tired of the whole business, and ready for a private settlement before they step in. In this case, we don't know all the facts yet, and I don't know exactly how to advise you. You should wait till after supper when everything is quiet and go and see the Elder and talk it over with him. If you are prepared to raise some money, you must remember how much you can afford. If you can spend a thousand dollars, just say five hundred. If you begin with a thousand, it will end up over two thousand. Since you will not take the law in your own hands, I am not urging you. But I must tell you one thing. If you have to sell land and property, don't ask Chuan Fei to be your middleman. That's all I have to say. You can go on scolding me if you like. I am thinking for your good."

Hullo Chuan was one of those rare men who did not mind being turned out of doors for his pains. It was a pity that while he was speaking, Little Tiger,

determined not to listen to the devil, had covered both his ears with his hands, and did not hear or understand what he said. He did not drop his hands until he heard Hullo Chuan's last sentence, "I'll see you again. I am going to see about the water buffalo. Perhaps he will not be angry with me for giving him that blow!"

It was sunset. We might think of sunset in a village as a pastoral landscape of surpassing beauty and an idyllic picture of human peace and content. And usually it was so. This was the time of the day when the village usually looked its best. The chickens roosted in the shrubs and birds circled in the air before settling on their nests. Farmers would be returning home after the day's work, hoes on their shoulders and ploughs in hand, trudging slowly and contentedly, while in front of them a few colts and calves pranced and gambolled and frisked like happy little children, to their great amusement. With the prospect of a good rest and a good dinner ahead, they would look at the smoke above the cottages and hum their folk songs. Children would be romping and shouting in the streets, playing their favourite games. The old

women who stayed home all day would now come out before their doorsteps, holding grandchildren in their arms and gossiping with one another. The pedlars and sellers of cold jellies and sweetmeats would gather in the squares, making a lively picture of a happy peaceful country life.

But on this day, it was not so, and the fault was not entirely the Captain's who only went on snoring all afternoon. The skies in the west glowed a brilliant bloody russet. An eagle was seen engaging the crows in combat, uttering short, shrill cries. The corn in the field had been all but devoured by the locusts and the farmers' heads hung low, their minds depressed, only hoping for a pouring rain to drive off the insects. The house-wives in their kitchens, too, were in a bad mood, for smoke blew down from the chimney and brought tears to their eyes. A smothering heat hung over the village, perhaps the prelude to a storm. Even the dogs seemed in bad humour, for no two dogs met but they must at once fall upon each other, biting and snarling ferociously.

On this evening, the streets were cleared of people except four or five women, including Tientien Ni'rh and the Elder's wife with a baby in her arms, sitting on the threshing floor to catch a breath of cool air and talking for talking's sake.

The Widow who usually loved the outdoors was sweating inside a tea-house, trying her luck against a group of men around the gambling table. The usually cheerful Hullo Chuan, ruffled by Little Tiger's refusal to take his advice and unable to do anything to help the father, was angry and impatient and disappointed at the wickedness and stupidity of all around him. Captain Chuan was still snoring aloud in his chair, seeming never to wake up, while the Elder sat and moved quietly, afraid to wake him and equally afraid to leave.

The curtain soon rose on a scene of commotion and the chief role was played by Tientien Ni'rh. The Elder's wife, feeling bored, was thinking of going home, but her baby, now in the hands of Tientien Ni'rh, was laughing and jumping, and she thought she would remain a while for the baby's sake. Since Tientien Ni'rh had given birth to an illegitimate child, her maternal instinct was shown in her great fondness for babies. While she was thus engaged in playing with the baby, she saw her third sister coming from Chuan Fei's house.

"Little Tientse, let me hold the big fat baby for a moment," said her third sister, putting out her hands.

"Go away!" replied the younger sister. "I have just had a little chance to hold him."

Tientien Ni'rh was not used to polite intercourse, especially with her third sister whom she hated.

"Why won't you let me hold him? Is he your child?" Her third sister's words came a little sharp.

"Neither is he yours. Take care that when your child comes, he knows who his father is." Tientien Ni'rh was never at a loss for parlance of this character.

"You little hussy!" A hard slap landed on Tientien Ni'rh's cheek. Tientien Ni'rh's whole personality was made like a bomb, ready to explode any moment, and the slap of course set it off. She set the child on the floor and went straight at her sister, bucking her head against her like a she-goat. In a moment, the two sisters were rolling over and over in the centre of the street, grappling each other like two dung beetles. There was no use trying to stop them or separate them. The frightened child cried and the grown-ups shouted and yelled, setting up a pandemonium. The sulky village dogs, frightened by the great human battle, slunk away. The village youths were enthralled by the sight of two women fighting in the street and thought it more enjoyable than a bawdy skit on the stage. They did not really want to stop them, but merely contented themselves with shouting, "Stop! Stop!" The more experienced members of the community

preferred to keep out of trouble by going away, for keeping out of trouble was the farmers' surest method of self-protection.

Attracted by the screaming women, all the rest of villagers came out. The first to appear was Hullo Chuan. He succeeded first in dragging the third daughter away, which gave Tientien Ni'rh a chance to stand up. When she noticed that a big slit had been torn in her new red blouse, she hurled herself against the third daughter again, sank her teeth into her opponent's thigh, and held on to it. By the time Hullo Chuan pulled her up by force, the third daughter was smeared with blood and yelling with pain.

The Elder feared that the noise of the scuffle might waken the sleeping Hero. He pulled the latch from the door, and handing it to his wife, said, "Here, beat those little rats to death!" With great agility, Tientien Ni'rh quickly snatched the weapon from the Elder's wife and was aiming a fatal crack at her opponent when she was stopped by Hullo Chuan.

The Widow was playing cards with Chuan Fei and the horse dealer at the tea-house. Strange to say, she had not been able to win once by completing a set ahead of the others. This was unprecedented and unknown in the entire history of

her gambling, but she had not been able to detect anything crooked. While puzzling over the strange phenomenon with half-closed eyes, she suddenly heard cries of "Murder!" coming from the street. She turned her cards down on the table, and said, "I know Little Tientse is up to some mischief again. I will go and stop her and come back to continue the game."

Chuan Fei's eyes followed the widow until she was outside and then he gave a knowing smile to the horse trader and commented "Beautiful, beautiful! That is what I call sleek."

"Let's go out also, lest she get suspicious," replied the horse trader, and out they went. With all the experience gained in their ten previous lives, they never could have guessed that the Widow would turn back as soon as she went outside and hide near the window. Seeing the place empty now, she slipped in, stealthily changed the cards of the different hands and pocketed the money on the table. Then she took up an iron poker and went toward the crowd, pretending to beat her two girls, cursing in a venomous death-dealing rattle. Again it was Hullo Chuan who stopped her.

"Little Tientse came to my home and stole my fifty coppers from the table the moment my eyes were turned," explained the third sister to her

mother. "I didn't say anything to her. But look, the little murderer has bit off a piece of my flesh."

"Shame on you!" retorted Tientien Ni'rh. "Your home, indeed! Your home is in the other village, but you wouldn't know your husband's house now. You accuse me of stealing your coppers. Where is the evidence? Hell is too good for you with your lying tongue!" Her sentences rang like the music of a xylophone.

"Ha! Ha! Ha!" roared the Widow until she completely doubled over, probably amused by the thought of her daughter's doing what she had just done herself. The crowd of bystanders could not understand what she was laughing at.

We do not know what it is, whether there is a proper connection between the stars above and human affairs below, but during this guttersnipe battle which promised no hope of a peaceful settlement, black clouds had gathered in the south-eastern sky. Lightning flashed and thunder rolled. A great shout of joy went up from the people in the streets. "Rain is coming! We are saved!" At once they ran to get mats and plaited reed covers to cover up the wheat stacks in the fields.

Tientien Ni'rh, seeing that the little skit had been properly enacted and should come to an end, firstly because she had already given a good show of

herself and secondly because she was now under the protection of her mother and was not afraid of reprisal, said with a sense of satisfaction, "If she does not make me a new blouse tomorrow, you will be surprised if I don't bite her ears off!"

"Go home! What are you still yelping about?" cried her mother.

The third daughter took a handful of earth and applied it to her wound while she replied, "If I don't chop off your three fingers and break your two front teeth tomorrow, my surname will no longer be Chuan." Thus the faces of both of them had been saved.

The third daughter was starting off toward home like a crestfallen partridge after a fight, when she saw Chuan Fei coming and immediately sat down on the ground and began to cry.

"Enough!" said Chuan Fei. "When dog bites dog, both get a mouthful of dog hair, that's all. Whom do you hurt but yourselves?"

He helped the third daughter up and nicely escorted her home. After a few steps, he turned round to say to the Widow, "I am not sure that I will come out to join you again. See that the money left on the table is put away properly."

As if in reply, the Widow handed the poker to the owner of the tea-shop and gave him the following

edifying and very masterly instruction, "Take back this funeral baton. I will take this wench home first and come back in a moment. See that nobody touches the cards. There is a whole night ahead, and whoever quits in the middle is the mongrel bastard of a pimp and a whore. I don't believe that they can always win."

"Well, just as you say. But don't you spank the girl when you go home. She is such a *sweet* girl!" The tea-house keeper spoke with sarcastic emphasis on the word "sweet".

"Thank you for reminding me. I was going to spank her. But I will not touch her since you say so," bandied back the Widow. "There are no reprobate monks in my temple. At the worst, little Tientse is better than your mother."

The Widow laughed and walked away. Somehow she was very happy. She had lost money at the game but had got it back again. "Well," she thought to herself, "it serves the horse dealer right." She was sure that there was something crooked in his play, and the only way to deal with a cheat was to beat him at his own game.

She had not been surprised to see the horse dealer come to the village to see his nephew, but she had shrewdly observed that up till supper-time the Captain had not seen him.

"Do you know that horse dealer is in the village?" she asked Tientien Ni'rh.

"Who doesn't? What is he up to this time?"

"I don't know," replied the mother. "Chuan Fei brought him here. And it does not look as if he has come to give everybody a feast. I bet you he wouldn't be accompanying Big Wu to see his sister's grave!"

It was true that the appearance of the horse dealer at the tea-house was news that had spread quickly through the village, for it was an event as unexpected as the Captain's returning home alive. Years ago, he had done things for the Chuan Clan to remember him by for ever. He had prevented the Captain's mother's burial and compelled the poor orphan of nine to sit by his mother's corpse for five days without permission to put her in the coffin. Subsequently his savage robbery of the boy's fortune had almost caused a bloody fight between the Clan and the maternal uncle's family.

When Big Wu, then known as "Little Wu", was nine, he had the misfortune to fall ill on New Year's day, and was confined to bed for five or six days. When on the second of January, the maternal uncle saw that his nephew still had not appeared to pay his New Year call, he felt insulted and slighted, and determined to correct him. On the fifth of

January, the day when it was considered bad luck for any family to have visitors, and when Little Wu was critically ill, the uncle appeared and announced as soon as he entered the door, "I have come to pay my respects to Little Wu. Outsiders will think we are estranged when they see that the nephew will not pay respects to his uncle, and if the uncle does not come himself to pay respects to the nephew." The mother had thought at first that her brother had come to see the sick child, but when she heard his words, she understood the purpose of his visit. She said some harsh words in reply. She forgot the old adage that "one may offend ten gentlemen, but not one mean person", and that this brother of hers was a veritable lone, white-eyed wolf who did not know his own father or mother, let alone other relatives.

As soon as the child got well Little Wu's mother fell ill from fatigue. At first she thought it was just an ordinary fever, and in the New Year season, she did not want to let her friends and relatives know. But the fever persisted and she became worse and worse, and finally died. A widowed mother was generally expected to endure years of hardship until her son grew up and prospered and then to enjoy the best period of her life in her old age. But this could not be so in her case.

In the countryside, it was regarded as a breach of courtesy not to notify the wife's family during her critical illness; the husband's family could not fix a day for the funeral without the wife's family's consent, and when the coffin was about to be let down into the grave, if representatives of the wife's family did not take a close look and say, "All right. Bury her!" the burial was illegal. When a daughter was married into another home, her maiden family felt as if their daughter was held as hostage, and therefore did their best to placate the husband's family, but once she died, the knife was held in the maiden family's hand. In her lifetime, the aunts and uncles and cousins of her own family might never think of her, but upon her death they were all deeply concerned. In other words, as soon as a woman died, her husband and children were under suspicion of murder, and therefore at the mercy of the wife's family. The general custom was to ask the husband's family to concede to the wishes of the wife's.

When the horse dealer had learned of his sister's death, he was overjoyed. At first, he remarked to others, "How could a perfectly healthy person die so suddenly? Why didn't they send us word that she was sick? They don't regard us as their relatives. Fine, let them go ahead with the funeral! We won't come.

Let them consider the maiden family all dead!"

A village elder like Chuan Fang-chou was one who always sided with the winner. He loved to sit at the top of the table on public occasions, but when trouble came he hid himself. He knew that in a quarrel of this kind, he would only offend both parties. Other people followed his example since it was mainly his responsibility. As a result, the poor nine-year-old child was left crying alone at his dead mother's side. This went on for five days, and the body was still lying on the bed, for no one dared to lay it in the coffin. Although it was winter, it had begun to smell horribly.

Fortunately, the Widow urged Hullo Chuan to take action. He ran between the two villages five or six times to settle the matter, and moreover had to bring the child to kowtow to every single one of the mother's family and plead for mercy. Only then did the uncle consent to come with his relatives and see that the body was laid in the coffin according to ceremony.

The four aunts and three aunts-in-law of Little Wu were the vanguard of this expedition. As soon as they saw the dead woman's clothes, they stamped their feet and refused to give consent. They pointed their fingers at Little Wu's forehead and scolded him, "You heartless boy! Other people may want

to spare the family property for themselves, but you, why don't you try to get some better clothes for your mother's burial? You are nine or ten. You are not too young. How heartless of this child!"

The Widow tried to put in a good word for him. "We must think of the living as well as of the dead. The family is in a poor way these years. And the poor little orphan has to live yet. You won't like to see your orphan nephew going about as a beggar. It won't look well for you, either."

The Widow then took out a bag of the dead woman's clothes and gave them each something as a present, and the affair was temporarily settled. During the laying in, the Widow noticed that a gold-plated brooch and two silver ear-rings had been taken from the dead woman, but she did not tell anybody.

The family from the other village was a very big one. The party had come in ten carts, carrying more than one hundred people—men, women, and children. What they came for was not the funeral but to get their proper shares of the buns and the mourning cloth. The buns were given on the day of the funeral, but the white cloth had to be distributed as soon as the relatives arrived. This white cloth wound around anybody's head entitled

him as a relative to demand food and drink free of cost. One aunt of Little Wu had taken twenty lengths of cloth and still complained of having not enough. A bystander remarked, "Those two babies under a month old should do with half a length each. A whole length would be sufficient to make an entire suit of mourning clothes." This remark greatly incensed the women from the other village. "If you can't afford to have a funeral, don't have one. Trying to be stingy even with the mourning cloth! Well, we won't take any, and we'll go home. Leave the cloth for those cheap people who can say cheap things, in case someone should die in their family!"

There was a deadlock. "Let's go home, and see whether they dare to bury the body!" cried an aunt. Hullo Chuan tried to stop the women, but he could not, and he saw that the women had rolled up Little Wu's bedding and two pairs of shoes and gone away with them. It can be seen that a funeral can be terribly expensive and can even ruin a family. That is why nobody wants to have one.

The horse dealer had been displeased to see that during all this trouble the Elder had hidden himself. When he saw the women going away, he thought the affair had taken a bad turn and he said to Hullo Chuan, "Just hold up the funeral until I go back and

talk with the women." He was trying to extract a good bargain.

In Hullo Chuan's opinion they should go ahead with the funeral anyway and let the spirit of the deceased "lie in peace", with or without the consent of the other family. But the Widow disagreed. "We must help to smooth the matter over, rather than to spoil it," she said. "If the other family should take the matter to court and sue for illegal burial, mentioning your name incidentally as the prime mover, you are going to wear yourself out running to town for the lawsuit. They are bargaining for a price. If we are smart we should haggle with them and settle for what we can get and be done with it. I tell you what we will do. You go and speak to the uncle and tell him that we shall hold the funeral day after tomorrow and invite them to come. Say that I shall see to it that they are satisfied. If he turns the "offer down, then we will think of something else."

Hullo Chuan wore the soles off his shoes during these negotiations. First of all, he led the two mules belonging to the orphan to the horse dealer's home, saying they were for him to keep. The horse dealer was satisfied, but he insisted on giving a lesson to the nine-year-old orphan by demanding that he go and kowtow to all his aunts by way of apology.

On a bitter cold grey morning, with the snow blowing in his face, Little Wu put on the ceremonial hemp cap of a son of the dead and wore the full mourning dress and went his way to his maternal uncle's home. The snow formed crystals on his eyebrows, and the north wind cut his pale, sallow face with a sharp sting. It was a harrowing experience, and it was a matter of great good luck that he did not die on the way from cold. Hullo Chuan, who was with him, led him into a roofless shelter on the way to get out of the wind and snow for a moment. He blew on his hand and spoke to the child.

"Remember that it is that good uncle of yours who has caused all this trouble."

"It is my mother who died, not his mother. Why can't I bury her without his consent?" Little Wu had asked. It was a mystery which had long been weighing on his mind.

"You don't know," replied Hullo Chuan. "We'll get into a lawsuit if we bury your mother without their consent. Besides, if they don't give the signal, you can't find anybody in the village to carry the coffin out of the house."

"Then so much the better. I hear that the dead come back to life after a few days. It will save trouble if we don't bury her."

"I hope so!" remarked Hullo Chuan with a sigh of pity. They went on in the howling snowstorm and completed their mission of apology.

When the day of the funeral arrived, it is hard to say how many guests had come. We only know that fifty tables were filled to overflowing. Two thousand buns were grabbed by all those hands and disappeared in a second, since they went chiefly into the guests' coat pockets.

Such an exhibition of savagery was not only sheer cruelty to the orphan; it amounted to vengeance and was resented by the entire village of the Chuans. The village youths thought that custom had been perverted into a licence for greed, which was a insult and abuse of the Chuan clan. They were itching for a fight. As soon as the coffin was laid, they were to have it out with that sickening family from the other village. But they were stopped by the Elder and others from starting a bloody fight. From that moment on, the horse dealer had studiously kept away from the outskirts of the Chuan village. He had good reason to feel ill at ease tonight.

The skies continued to darken and crashes of thunder came at shorter intervals. The Elder went back to see the War Hero and found him still snoring. He dared not wake him, knowing that when a great man lost his sleep, the world was bound to pay for it. The Hero had given in his sleep an order that he wanted to have a vegetarian supper, and without confirmation they did not know how to prepare it. He thought it would be well to send for Hullo Chuan and get his advice.

The man sent to fetch him was the farm labourer whose trousers' band had been held prisoner for some time by Tientien Ni'rh. As Hullo Chuan had gone off to help others cover up the wheat, the messenger came back without finding him. Naturally he received a scolding for being "perfectly useless", uttered with the pent-up anger of the Elder and the same venom with which he had kicked him at noon.

"Go back and look for him again!" the Elder bawled. The labourer was extremely unhappy. His cheeks seemed still to burn from the girl's slap under people's gaze, and his pants' seat still smarted

from his master's kick. He had lost his face and his honour in the village community. He saw other young men, and even women, laugh at him as he passed by. Consequently he had been sulking all afternoon. Absently he stumbled over a bucket in broad daylight and broke it, and he heard the Elder's wife remark to her daughter-in-law, "I thought he was an honest fellow. The idea of touching a girl's breast in public."

"It is true," he said to himself, "when a man runs into bad luck, something will get between his teeth even when he drinks a glass of water." Of all things he should be sent chasing after Hullo Chuan at his supper hour, when he was entitled to rest, and where was Hullo Chuan? He was sick of his employer and sick of his job. He thought since he had lost his face, which meant the respect of his fellow man, he would pack up and quit. With a grunt he went away. This time he decided to sit in the cowshed waiting for Hullo Chuan, who certainly must come home some time during the night.

The rain had begun to come with some force. Hullo Chuan was busy helping the other farmers in the field as enthusiastically as if he were going to receive a share of their harvest. When all the wheat had been properly covered and puddles had formed on the roads, he decided that having helped the men,

he should go and help the women. He went straight to the Widow's home in the pouring rain.

"Wherever does this drowned ghost come from?" exclaimed Tientien Ni'rh, when she opened the door and with the help of a flash of lightning recognised Hullo Chuan. "Strip to your wet hide and put on one of my dresses."

"Don't be silly. Do you think I will put on your women's outfit?" said Hullo Chuan as he took off his jacket and wrung it. "Where is your mother?"

"She has gone back to the tea-house to play against the horse dealer. And in such a rain too! I said I would go with her, but she insisted on my staying at home."

"Where is your fourth sister?" Hullo Chuan asked with a full smile.

"She was angry at you for not coming and has gone to bed."

"You little liar! Who is in bed?" The Fourth Fairy had heard their talk and could not remain in her religious posture. She had come out to welcome Hullo Chuan. Snatching out a black bag used for picking cotton, she threw it to him. "Here, cover yourself with this. You came out in this pouring rain! Why, are you not afraid the lightning might blow you up?"

"Oh, no, there are too many persons deserving

that," said Hullo Chuan. "Foreigners have lightning rods on their roofs. I have one on my body, too."

"What is it like?" inquired Tientien Ni'rh.

"I don't cheat, don't lie, don't make false charges of salt smuggling. I have a good conscience. That's my lightning rod. Whenever did you see a good man struck by lightning?" Hullo Chuan broke into laughter, throwing his head up as if he and Father Heaven were good old friends.

"Father Heaven is blind, whatever you call him," remarked Tientien Ni'rh. "People like my third sister and Chuan Fei should have been struck by lightning long ago, if Father Heaven had eyes. You saw it yourself a moment ago. I was almost torn to pieces by them."

"You naughty child, to blaspheme against Father Heaven! You will get a bad boil on your lips for this," said the Fourth Fairy, and then turned to Hullo Chuan, "Of course, you have heard of Shih San-pao's arrest."

"Who hasn't? That crook Chuan Fei has gone mad. A hare does not feed on the grass outside its nest. I wouldn't mind if he cheated and fell foul of the law abroad. But to ruin a fellow villager!" Hullo Chuan felt angry again and the veins on his temples stood out. With his bare head and the cotton bag thrown around his shoulders, he looked

like a picture of a crazy monk. Lost in his own anger, he was totally unaware of the artful smiles that the Fourth Fairy was casting upon him.

“It is really wicked of him,” remarked Tientien Ni’rh. “Blowing at a winepot for a musical instrument! Because somebody would not let him eat his oil puffs without pay, he got mad and thought up a mean scheme for revenge!”

“Be careful of your tongue, Little Tientse!” warned the Fourth Fairy.

“If it were not for the rain, I would have gone to town and made inquiries about what is happening to Shih San-pao,” said Hullo Chuan impatiently.

“Don’t bother about other people’s affairs,” said the Fourth Fairy gently. “You might catch your death of a cold by going out in such rain, and there would be no one to look after you. Stay and spend an evening with us. Little Tientse, what do you say to going out and getting some *paikan* and having a drink together?”

“Pish! I am not your slave girl.” Tientien Ni’rh knew very well why her sister wanted to send her away, and made it amply clear that she was not going.

“I will go and buy the wine and I will be back immediately,” said Hullo Chuan, giving the Fourth Fairy a significant pressure on her shoulder. She

understood and made way for him to pass out of the house.

“Bring me a pack of crystal sugar from the grocery,” cried Tientien Ni’rh. Hullo Chuan did not hear her in the rain and went straight to the cowshed.

The labourer had been waiting for him there in this miserable night, still sore because of the day’s happenings. He hated it all, this job, the Elder, and now even Hullo Chuan and the sight of the buffalo. He thought of that mysterious creature, the Widow’s daughter in a red blouse, angrily shouting at him and pulling at his trousers. Strange to say, his anger was now mollified. Her angry face had been beautiful to see. It should be said that Tientien Ni’rh, though a little bony, was nevertheless a thin replica of her famous beautiful sisters. Somehow he felt a pleasurable sensation recalling the incident. “The idea of her pulling at my trousers!” he said angrily, and found that on repeating it a second time, he was saying it amusedly. He could not quite account for this. She had such big, black eyes, too. She was just about the only interesting person in the village. All the rest he hated. He saw on the wall a colour print, depicting a big forest fire, and the thought entered his mind that if he should light a bunch of cornstalks and set the cowshed on fire, he could at

once smoke Hullo Chuan out of his hiding. While toying with the idea, he visibly started to see Hullo Chuan enter the room.

“Thank heavens!” he cried. “My boss has been waiting for you all this time. Come, quick, follow me. If you don’t come immediately, I think he is going to have a fainting fit.”

“Be easy,” said Hullo Chuan. “Nobody is going to deliver a grandson in the next minute. Let me first feed this guest from the south.”

“Why, you are crazy! Do you regard this beast as more important than the Elder of the village?”

“Exactly,” said Hullo Chuan as he took out some hay and carefully picked out from it two chicken feathers for fear of choking the buffalo. “What do you think? What will be a greater catastrophe at this moment, if the village Elder dies or the buffalo dies?”

The rain cleared up as suddenly as it had come. When Hullo Chuan left the cowshed with the farm hand, water was still coming down from the eaves, but when they arrived at the ancestral temple they could see a clear blue, starlit sky. The temperature had gone down and the earth seemed to rejoice in the moisture. Peace had been restored in heaven and on earth, but there was not much good will among men. The Elder lost his patience when he saw the two of them. He shook his fist at them and

berated them with a string of abuse. The labourer was in a mood to throw a bowl at him but contained this anger and merely sulked. But Hullo Chuan had an old hatred for the Elder and answered back.

“You are my senior,” he said, “and you might inform me what you are angry about? I am stupid as a pig and cannot guess what you are brandishing your fist for?” He took the black cotton bag from his shoulders, rolled it under his arm and prepared to leave the room. He knew that the only way to avoid being bullied by the Elder was to show that he had no fear of him.

“What are you guessing about?” The voice was that of the Captain which, being so unexpected from one who was in dreamland, gave the Elder a visible start. The Elder wished very much to wring Hullo Chuan’s neck, but when he heard the Captain’s voice, his face melted into a smile and he left immediately to order food for the honoured guest. The labourer took the chance to slip out.

The Captain drank a glass of cold tea, and picked some of the tea leaves from the bottom and chewed them.

“I don’t want any supper except a dish of ‘gold over silver’, and two catties of buns, because I am going vegetarian tonight.”

“Why, you still remember gold over silver?” said

Hullo Chuan, beaming with smiles, holding a basin of hot water for him to wash. He remembered that twenty years ago, when he was accompanying Big Wu, then a small boy, to a prefect school, they had stopped at an inn and ordered this rare dish. The innkeeper was embarrassed at not knowing what it was and promised to give them a free meal if Hullo Chuan would tell him how to make it. Hullo Chuan explained that it was a dish made by first frying egg white and then dipping it in the yolk and frying it once more. It was an incident of which they had been very proud, but he had not thought that the Captain would still remember.

“Don’t I remember!” answered Big Wu. “Do you recall that once you asked me to go into a theatre and sit in the box without pay by pretending to be the magistrate’s son with you acting as my bodyguard?” The Captain, in the happy reminiscences of his childhood, had forgotten his air of importance.

The Elder was mortified to see that the Captain was more friendly to Hullo Chuan than to himself. Puffing at his water pipe and thinking of something appropriate to contribute to the conversation, he said suddenly, “Now I have got it. I have thought of a good excuse for having a theatrical show to which there can be no objection from the magistrate.”

“What is that?” asked the Captain happily.

“You see, with this big shower a while ago, the locusts will have disappeared and the ground will be ready for the second planting. We will say we are having a celebration to thank both the god of pestilence and the god of rain. Nobody can object to that, and it will be easy to collect money for such a purpose.” The Elder smiled a proud self-satisfied smile.

Hullo Chuan showed a keen interest in the subject as giving him something to do. “If you are going to do that, we shall have to order it right tomorrow. I hear that a theatre troupe in town, with nuns in it, is just about to close its programme. We have to get them quickly, or they will go somewhere else.” The Elder eyed him coldly.

“Why do they ban the theatre in the country and not in the city?” said the Captain. Then added, “Never mind. Perhaps it will be all right. Send someone to town tomorrow and order a programme for a few days.”

“Just leave it to me,” replied the Elder before Hullo Chuan had a chance to say anything more.

“Who do you think you are? Why don’t you take a good look at yourself in the mirror, you worm!” A sharp scolding voice was heard from the street, which startled both the Elder and the Captain.

Hullo Chuan's sharp ears easily discerned that this was the Widow's voice. What had happened and why wasn't she gambling at the tea-house? He went out and was surprised to find that the person being scolded was the horse trader, the Captain's maternal uncle.

The horse trader should not have come with Chuan Fei to the village, and anyway he should have known better than to run into the Widow. "A boxer cannot fight a woman, and a gentleman cannot fight a bum." He should have known that Topping Westgate was both a woman and something of a bum. When he returned from watching the street fight of the Widow's daughters and found that the hands of cards had been changed and the money was gone, he knew that he was aboard a pirate's boat, and went to consult Chuan Fei, who rolled his big eyes twice and in a second said with a smile, "Second uncle, I would advise you to drop the matter. Who do you think would have the nerve to do such a thing except that old she-tiger? She could beat us with her eyes closed, whether in a match of strength or of wits. You think you are a sharp wheat blade that can cut pretty deep, but she is a steel needle, harder and sharper still. Forget about it, and don't say anything. It will be good for your health."

However, the gods had made the horse dealer blind, and he went straight to speak to the Widow when she reappeared at the gambling place. The Widow rejoiced when she heard his complaint and thought to herself, "Ho! Here's a blind mouse trying to snatch a piece of meat from a cat's mouth. You are looking for trouble." She went up to him, narrowed her eyes to narrow slits, gave him a clear, crisp slap, and then opened her barrage in her best street-brawl style.

"What are you taking me for? Don't you know what a lout you are, and if you don't know yourself, you might have taken the trouble to ask others. I am not like your nephew who can be twisted around anyone's little finger. So you think you are somebody, you surly dog! All the people of this village, from grown-ups to children, know that you are no better than a louse or a worm. Perhaps you think you can rely on that nephew of yours who has become an official? Pshaw! I am afraid when he remembers how you prevented his mother's funeral he won't care so much for such a blackguard uncle."

The Widow's words cut deep and sharp, and had the admirable virtues of both weight and brevity. The Captain, sitting in the ancestral temple, heard every syllable of it, which seemed to impinge upon his consciousness like short, quick stabs. He felt a

pleasurable sensation in hearing that rascal of an uncle being so scolded, but it also called up bitter memories of his childhood. He bent his head and kept quiet, thinking how he, as a child of nine, had had to sit by his mother's corpse for five days and how he had to go out in the cold wind and snow to kowtow to this uncle and his mother's maiden family to beg them to permit the burial.

"Go and stop them," the Elder said to Hullo Chuan. "This is getting too much."

"No, I will go myself," said the Captain. "I can recognise Second Big Auntie's voice. She must be over sixty and her voice still rings." He vaguely remembered that the Widow had been kind to him during his mother's funeral.

Exasperated beyond bounds, the Elder followed the Captain out of the ancestral temple. The noise was still going on in the tea-house, for the Widow was ranting and raving at the horse dealer with the full flow of her eloquent tongue. Anybody else in such a situation would have felt the sting of her abuse. The horse dealer, however, had sobered. He had come like a swollen balloon in the self-convinced belief that he was the distinguished uncle of a newly arrived distinguished nephew, but the Widow had chosen to prick the balloon. He was not in his own village and the situation was getting too hot for him.

He put on a gentle, pacific smile and said to the Widow, "You are right. I thank you. It serves me right."

The crowd looked ominous. For the whole village had waked up by this time and had run outdoors to witness the scene. The Widow's tirade against someone hated by the entire village sounded sweeter to their ears than the rain of an hour ago. With their sleeves rolled up and their legs bare, they had gathered outside the tea-shop, shouting, "Beat him! Bury him alive!" The Widow saw the angry crowd and feared it would get out of hand. She had really no reason to be angry, and had wanted merely to frighten the man. Now she saw the farmers' state of mind, their eyes distended and their muscles tensed for action, and she was afraid the man might be killed. She called out to everybody, "Keep quiet everybody.. Murder has to be paid for with life. I can handle this fellow perfectly well alone." Motioning to the horse dealer who had turned deathly pale, and pointing to a wide open window at the back, she shouted to him, "Get away! Do you want to be buried alive?"

With the broken palm-leaf fan in her hand, she smothered the oil lamp. The room was suddenly dark. When the tea-house keeper lighted the lamp again, the horse dealer was gone.

It was night. The farmers were supposed to be fast asleep, but there were many in that village that night who were not.

First of all, the horse dealer could not sleep, and that is easy to understand, even if he was not to receive a midnight caller, as we shall soon see.

Hullo Chuan suddenly remembered that he had promised the Fourth Fairy to return immediately, and that he had been away an unexpectedly long time. The door of the Widow's house was half closed, and he went straight in. He found the Fourth Fairy's room locked, but there was light inside. Peeping through the window, he saw her sitting on the earthen bed all by herself, hugging her knees and staring into space, apparently waiting for him, her mouth pouted in an expression of impatience. Hullo Chuan saw her in that charming posture and regretted he had wasted time at the tea-house. He tapped on her window and called her in a whisper, but she blew out the lamp and kept quiet. It was clear to him that she was annoyed with him for keeping her waiting, and he could not blame her.

The window was rather high, and he climbed half-way up a tree to speak to her. He explained and

begged her pardon and spoke the tenderest words of love that he knew. Under the cover of the dark, one could say and do many bold things which one would not dare in broad daylight. It would have made the subject for a great painting if someone could have seen him and caught the expression on his face at that moment. But in spite of his entreaties, the Fourth Fairy would not let him in.

“Well, if you feel that way, I am leaving!” he said in a tone of great disappointment and jumped down to the ground.

The Fourth Fairy had not been really angry, but had merely wanted to show him how hurt she was. Now that she heard that he was going away, she immediately came down from her bed, opened the door, and called after him. Tientien Ni’rh had pretended to be asleep, and had heard all that was going on. She now came out also and joined her sister in asking Hullo Chuan to come in. After Hullo Chuan and her sister went in, she remained outside, sniffing the cool air and looking at the clear sky. She thought she heard a noise in the shadows and stopped to listen, but the noise was gone. Thinking it was some prowling animal, she remained another minute, thinking of the amusing incident with the labourer, not knowing that he was near-by.

The tea-house keeper could not go to sleep until

the gamblers had left. Sitting out in the yard, he saw a number of shooting stars, and suddenly he thought he would like to make some money. At once he took down his trousers band and tied it into a knot. As soon as he saw a "thief star", that is, a shooting star, he would pull the knot tight. According to the village people, the thief star thus caught would beg for mercy to be released, and therefore some money would unexpectedly come his way the next day. But the thief stars seemed to be aware of the trap set for them and refused to come out any more. He sat there, watching the fireflies weaving through the branches of the elm tree.

It was the Widow's habit to turn night into day. As soon as the sun had set, she felt in perfect form. This day she had had everything her own way, and she was therefore more happily awake than ever. As for all her daughters, night was the proper time to follow their principal occupation. They had been trained by the mother to sit up all night. Even when there were no visitors, the mother and daughters would play at dice all night.

The Elder could not sleep, for he had had enough trouble that day, acting host to the returned hero. His nerves were about to collapse. The little urchin had become an important person and treated him

without the respect due him as his senior and as the village Elder. In fact, he had been ordered about by the Captain, and appeared no more important than a head servant. To say that his pride was wounded would be a moderate expression of his feeling at the end of the day. If this was the first day, what would the following days be like? Why should a war hero return to his village and cause all this upset? He thought of the theatrical entertainments they were going to put on, which he had helped to propose in a thoughtless moment, but which in his cooler judgment he would advise against. Besides the rush of preparations and the thousand things to be done, anything might happen during such a village celebration, with the soldiers and the police, and the big crowd of strangers from out of town. He thought over the ten (there had to be ten) reasons why a theatrical performance should not be given, which he had tried to present to the War Hero, and the eight which he actually did give before the Hero fell asleep and snored most disrespectfully. Now he seemed to be able to count only seven. He almost gave up and decided to go to sleep, but his nerves kept him awake. The harder he tried, the more awake he remained. He was conscious that his bed boards creaked when he turned about, which he had not noticed before. The War Hero!

He had had enough of it. He came back to the seven reasons and decided to make them ten. Reason One, there were many soldiers in the neighbourhood; and Reason Two, it was difficult to maintain peace and order. A sudden inspiration came to him. Reason One, it was difficult to maintain peace; Reason Two, it was difficult to maintain order; Reason Three, there were too many soldiers; Reason Four, there were too much riffraff. That accounted for four, and the rest was easy. Reason Ten was less explicit, but more comprehensive, it was given the heading of "*general unrest*". With so many dissatisfied poor and thieves and gamblers and prostitutes and beggars and strangers coming, he was sincerely worried. He had a sudden premonition of a personal catastrophe. Why did the War Hero have to return? Why could he not leave the village alone and in peace?

At midnight, he felt like calling the labourer to give him a good kick. He knew that if he could give a hearty scolding to somebody in his normal patriarchal tone of authority, he would feel better again. He actually rose to call the labourer. There was no answer. He went to the room where the labourer slept, but he was nowhere to be seen. That made it worse. He lay awake in his bed to watch for the man's return. In those long dark

hours he remembered hearing Hullo Chuan say that there was a troupe of young "nuns" which they were going to engage. He wondered whether he would be able to put them up in his home, whether his wife would object. . . . He did not know when he fell asleep.

The Captain could not sleep, because, apart from eating, he had done nothing all afternoon except sleep and snore. Night was a bad time to be awake, for the imagination of the most unimaginative grew extraordinarily keen, and the most absent-minded remembered every detail which he had apparently not even noticed in the daytime. One of the things which he in his absence of mind had not taken proper cognisance of and which now forced itself upon his attention was that the basin of water which Hullo Chuan had handed him had a yellowish deposit at the bottom. The mystery of that yellow silt assumed great importance and fateful meaning to him now. He was aware that there was no clean water supply in the village. The more he thought of the origin of that deposit, the more frightened he got. Point One, there had been a big shower. Point Two, puddles had formed in the streets, mixed with all kinds of excrement. Point Three, this water, infested with millions of bacteria, had found its way to a crack and seeped down into the well.

Point Four, Hullo Chuan had hauled it from the well and poured it into a basin. Point Five, he had washed his face in it. Point Six was the big, fatal question, whether he was going to suffer from dysentery and lie in agony for the next six weeks, that is, whether in wiping his face, any part of his towel could have touched the mucous membrane of his lips. Try as he might, he could not retrace his own hand movements. It seemed that it had, and again it seemed it hadn't. Suppose a few drops, only a few drops, had touched his mouth, he would be done for. By count, there must be thirty million microbes of the most deadly and most virile variety racing at this moment in his stomach—past his duodenum—in his small intestines—the most energetic wriggling ones ahead while the army swarmed behind. This brought up Point Seven, whether there was a good hospital in town. It was certain that the doctors there who had allowed his foreign Kweifei to die from a mere wound were incompetent. Suddenly he felt a gurgle in his stomach; he had really eaten too much. He went to the outhouse. From that moment on, peace had left him for the night. There was no more sign of bacterial activity but he remembered the incubation period. At this dark hour, millions of microbe mothers were hatching millions of microbe babies,

all powerful, all energetic, all wriggling. He wished fervently that the Jap had not dug out his heart, and he could not remember exactly whether he had wiped his lips with the towel or had not. . . . Of all those who lay in bed that night, he must be accounted the most awake of all.

But there were two persons especially busy and up on their feet that night, Little Tiger and the farm labourer. The labourer was from another village and was known to be a hard-working and quiet worker who attended to his duties and never talked much. The public disgrace that day and men's laughter at him were just about the last straw in his burden of wrongs and injustices which he had suffered at his employer's hand. It was a fore-gone conclusion that he could not work in the village any longer, to be laughed at by everybody. He did not hate the others in the village, but he did hate the Elder and his whole household. Consequently, his sympathy lay rather on the side of the horse dealer and he would ask him for a job. He did not know the past history of the horse dealer or the grievance the village held against him, but he did see how he was run out of the village—in fact, had barely saved his life only through the quick wit of the Widow. But something else had happened to him—he did not know what. He had been slapped

by that girl. It had never happened to him before. Now what did that mean? Of all people in that crowd why did Tientien Ni'rh choose to accuse him? What was the significance of her pulling at his trousers band—so intimate a gesture? Could it be an invitation? He had not touched a girl before. What he was conscious of was that he had strong arms and muscles. That feeling of masculine strength was particularly awakened in him now. What were a girl's breasts like, which he did not know and which he had been accused of touching? He could lift ten little girls like Tientien Ni'rh, and he wished he could see those breasts.

He decided to quit his job and the village and he got up to go and see the horse dealer. Somehow his steps led him to the Widow's house, partly impelled by curiosity, and partly by something else. He knew that the daughters of that family never went to bed in the first half of the night, and perchance he might get a glimpse of that girl through a window. He wanted to see that mysterious, audacious creature. He said to himself that if he saw her, he would go to her and ask her point blank why she had lied to ruin him. It gave him a curious sensation as he stepped lightly toward her house in the dark, the same feeling he had had when

he was working as a gardener in another village and stalking a wildcat that used to come to plague his chickens at night.

When Tientien Ni'rh stood outside the door after seeing Hullo Chuan go in with her sister, she felt she wanted a man for herself. Her attention was attracted by a noise. Then the noise stopped. When she next heard footsteps, she asked in the dark, "Is that you, Ma?"

The labourer went up to her. "It's I. You should know me."

Tientien Ni'rh did not recognise his voice and was frightened. The man had come close.

"Why did you lie about me?"

"Who are you?"

"You ought to know. Why did you accuse me of touching you and make me lose face before everybody?"

"Oh, it's you!" She broke into laughter.

"You can't go around accusing people for no reason. I never touched you. You know that."

"Oh, touch what?" She giggled.

Even in the dark, the labourer could not pronounce the word, but Father Heaven, what did she mean? He evaded her question, but asked another in the same direction.

"Why did you pull my trousers?"

"Ho! ho! ho! Are you still angry? What are you angry about?"

She pinched his cheek, and her tone was playful and inviting as she continued, "Can't you see, it was just in fun? . . ." She broke into a laugh again. "A big fellow like you, still abashed before a girl! Don't lie and pretend. A girl of my age knows a few things. What cat does not go near a fish basket? You don't suppose I would really mind if you touched me, do you?"

Now his blood was up. "Really?"

But as he raised his hands to touch her, he received a sound whack on his right and then on his left.

"You dirty little wench!" The labourer went close to her. He had never kissed a girl before, and did not know how, but he took her by force and crushed her between his arms until she was almost out of breath.

"Let me go! Let me go!" she begged. "You are suffocating me."

"It serves you right," he said as he released her.

If she had chosen to call for help, or "stage an act", as she put it, he was done for. Hullo Chuan and the Fourth Fairy were in the house and heard Tientien Ni'rh talking with someone, but they were too much occupied with themselves to bother about their tender sister who they knew was perfectly

capable of taking care of herself. As it was, the girl merely turned and walked silently into the house.

“Well, that’s that!” said the labourer, feeling very much better. With restored confidence, he went on his way to see the horse dealer in the next village. He told him that he was quitting his place and asked if there was a job for him. The horse dealer listened with great interest when he lay before him his grievance against the Elder, the Widow’s daughter, and the Chuan village. The subject of the Widow’s daughter interested the horse dealer especially. There the labourer’s plan was formed, under the horse dealer’s advice.

Little Tiger’s house was in great confusion. His father was under detention and nothing had yet been done for his release. The family was only offering prayers to the Buddha and filling the house with incense smoke, besides the noise of weeping, sighing, and complaints about their stars and about each other. But matters were coming to a head, and the family was about to take the sad plunge to insolvency, that is, to sell the land on which they depended for their living. Chuan Fei had not expected that the horse dealer would be run out of town without seeing his distinguished nephew, and he was afraid now that his plan might miscarry. He had therefore privately urged Little Tiger to go to

the Salt Bureau that very night and settle matters, for fear that the War Hero might hear of the arrest from some other source and interfere. When the family saw Little Tiger take out from an old trunk the deed to the land, they felt as if somebody was sticking a knife into their hearts. They saw Little Tiger go out with the deed in his hand, knowing that he had taken their very rice bowl along with it.

When morning came, the farmers were very busy in the fields. Farms which had been half destroyed by the locusts had to be cleared to make way for new plants to keep the soil in good condition. Harvest was only half finished and they already had to prepare for the second planting.

On the highway leading to town, there were two persons, Hullo Chuan and Shih San-pao, who attracted the farmers' attention.

"Where are you going so early, Hullo Chuan? There is no fair today," a farmer asked.

"Ah! The War Hero said that you people work too hard, and I am sent to engage a theatrical company for a grand celebration in our village. Finish your work quickly, so that we can all enjoy a good show."

"Is it true?" remarked someone. "Don't engage

a play without actresses in it. I hear that a troupe with young nuns in it has been playing in town. Why don't we engage them?"

"That is exactly what I am going to do," said Hullo Chuan in high spirits. "I don't know where they are going to stay when they are here. But in the matter of attendance, you young people had better divide up in groups and work by turn. The last time it was too disorderly, with all the young men fighting to serve rice to the actresses."

"Hullo Chuan," said another. "Have a fine mat shed made for the theatre. The one last time looked like one for a funeral."

"Don't worry. It will have a ridge in the centre of the roof, and I am going to have all new mats, all bright new, without a single blemish."

An old farmer shook his head in disapproval. "Theatre means trouble," he said. He quoted a proverb that in giving a theatre show one has to "prevent theft, prevent robbery, and prevent fire," and "waste money, waste energy, and waste time."

"Don't worry, old Uncle, this performance is to celebrate your long life." Hullo Chuan, able to humour everyone, went on his way.

At about ten o'clock, the farmers resting and smoking in the field during an interval saw a pitiful and sensational sight—the return of the arrested

Shih San-pao, escorted by his two sons.

Shih San-pao seemed hardly able to walk on his own legs. Nobody knew what he had gone through during the previous day and night, but they saw that his head was bandaged with a piece of blue cloth with many blood clots on it. His greasy shirt was torn in back and front. He was so weak that his legs moved very slowly, a small step at a time. His head bent low, and now and then he uttered a groan. Some were so shocked at his appearance that they averted their eyes and preferred not to look, while others went to speak to him, but in their sympathy they could not say anything except, "Glad you have come back," and smile a bitter smile.

Shih San-pao was known to be a stubborn person, erect as an oak. Now in his deep shame all he wanted was not to be seen by his neighbours. He had lost face. He kept mumbling as he went, "All is over now. They have destroyed me." He was almost out of his mind with grief and pain. For he knew that though he was spared his life, his land was gone and his family was ruined.

Little Tiger was a dutiful son and tried his best to comfort his father. "Don't worry, father. What is past cannot be helped. Regard it as if some one of us had an incurable disease and we spent all our money and his life was saved, and that is something

to be happy about. We two sons can go out and work as day labourers. We won't let you starve, Father. We will give up that oil-puff business, to avoid offending people. Besides, the land is only mortgaged, not sold for good, and later when we have better luck, we can redeem it. Don't worry, Father, we will rise early and work late and hard. Heaven will bless us."

Little Root had been shocked when he had first seen his father come out of the Salt Bureau in that mangled condition, and had tried to restrain his tears. Now when he heard his elder brother's words, great tears rolled down his face.

"Sons," said the father, "what you say is right. But you must know that this land was purchased by your great-grandfather. For three generations we have been living on it. I have not been able to add to it, but I have at least kept it intact, hoping to pass it on to you two brothers. I never thought that this was going to happen to me in my old age. Now you have to depend entirely on your hands to make a decent living. I can do nothing for you now. This is too much—too much to swallow." He closed his fist and said, "Avenge me, my sons."

"Who is the enemy?" asked Little Root.

"Who?" asked the father. He did not know, except that it was the Salt Bureau.

"Father," said Little Tiger, "we are farmers. You must not talk of revenge. If we farmers are not willing to put up with things, who would? Heaven will punish the wicked, and I know that the bad man will get his deserts in the end. You watch and see." Little Tiger had a whole philosophical tradition behind him.

"We must make clear who are our enemies and must not forget our friends," said the father. "Yesterday at the shop there was no one I knew. Chuan Fei came to see me and always spoke on my behalf. It did not look as if he was in it. And the second daughter of the Widow was good to me as a fellow villager. She gave me food and water and tea. Were it not for her, I would have died. But that son of a bitch, the fat proprietor, he is the worst blackguard I have known."

The three made their way slowly to the village. Some women saw them coming and hid to watch them from behind doors. Only Tientien Ni'rh went up to them and asked in affected surprise, "Oh, heavens! What has happened?"

"What has happened? I have been slapped in the face, lost my face! I am ruined! I can't face the world now!"

Tientien Ni'rh wanted to ask more questions, but she saw the pale, bloodless face of Shih San-pao

and she kept following them with her eyes until they were out of sight.

“Second Auntie,” said Tientien Ni’rh to the Elder’s wife. “So you know that Shih San-pao has come back!”

“Oh, I am happy to hear it! It does not matter how much money they have spent to get his release. I saw the whole family crying all day without cooking a meal. It was pitiful.”

“Ai, he has come back. But you haven’t seen how he looks. He was carried home by two people.”

“Carried home? Is he dead?” The Elder’s wife dropped to the floor the shoes she was making.

“No, not dead, but it won’t be long. His whole body is bruised purple, and there are seven or eight wounds on his head. He came home without shoes or stockings, and his legs can barely move. I saw his two sons with swollen eyes, weeping as if at a funeral.”

“Ts! Ts!” the Elder’s wife clicked her tongue in pity. “To be so brutally treated for a man of his old age!”

“Second Auntie,” continued Tientien Ni’rh, “do you know how he was released? You know that fellow who came back yesterday on a water buffalo? They are afraid that if he speaks to the magistrate to

release him, they will not get a cent. So they talked Little Tiger into paying the fine last night."

"Who told you?"

"My mother told me. She knows everything. She knows exactly how the shares are divided. One share is for your husband, too." She was telling the truth, but she smiled artfully.

"Don't lie! Be careful what you say," said the Elder's wife. Then to change the unpleasant topic, she continued, "I hear that they are going to have a theatre show in the village."

"Yes. Early this morning Hullo Chuan came to borrow some money from my fourth sister and he went to town to engage a troupe—with young nuns in it! They sing very well and are really pretty. They are all my friends and I will put them up at my home. If you like them, I will ask them to come and be your foster daughters."

"Thank you, I have my own daughters. I don't approve of nuns going into the theatre. I shall be surprised if they don't go to hell after death."

"You don't like them, but Second Uncle does!"

Tientien Ni'rh realised that she had made a slip of the tongue and at once started to run away, but the Elder's wife grabbed her.

"What did you say? You said your Second Uncle likes actresses?"

"Why should I lie to you? Is there a cat that does not like fish? Don't you believe the men when they talk to their wives. Whenever there was a play going on with actresses in it, Second Uncle always asked them to dinner."

She decided to sit down and talk because she could not help herself now. The result of the conversation was that the Elder's wife began to hate the whole theatrical profession and their plays. Whenever a theatre show was being put on, it gave her much work. She agreed the nun-actresses should stay in the Widow's house, since her own house had no spare rooms.

Toward supper-time the people of the village and their guests who had been invited to come to see the plays were standing outdoors to enjoy the evening air. Carts containing goods of the textile merchants were beginning to arrive and to go to their assigned places where stalls were to be set up. Sellers of fans had already put up their stalls. A man from the troupe had been sent ahead to see the place and had arrived on a black mule with cowbells on its neck. The air was tense with expectation.

At this moment, the piercing sound of weeping penetrated their ears, and they knew at once that Shih San-pao was dead. Tientien Ni'rh came to

report to the crowd that since his return the old man had refused to touch a drop of water or any food. Broken in spirit, in shame, and in anger, the old man had simply died.

“Old Father Heaven!” the villagers sighed. They saw Little Tiger come out with a wine-pot and some paper money on his way to say prayers for the dead at the Earth God’s temple. Sadly the people turned back to their homes.

At the Shih home, after the ablutions and other ceremonies, the first guest to come and offer his condolences was Chuan Fei. He bowed four times to the corpse and made the ceremonial cry duly and remarked with a sigh, “How a man’s life passes out, just like the blowing out of a lamp! I didn’t see him for a few days, and thought that he was unwell and was staying at home for a rest. Who would have thought—? Ah! sooner or later this comes to all of us. It is too bad that this happens when all of us are busy preparing for a celebration. I would advise you to bury him as soon as possible.”

“Of course, right away tomorrow. We can’t afford to give a regular funeral. We will take him out in a cheap coffin and then we brothers have to go out and work as day labourers. What can we do when somebody plays a practical joke on our family?”

The villagers came to offer their condolences, too.

Usually guests speak of the last days before the man's death and what remains to be done for the family. But on this occasion they merely sighed in sympathy and avoided all mention of the circumstances of his arrest. All agreed that it had been written in the stars.

10

All day preparations had been going on in the village for the big theatre show. For it meant that people would be coming from other towns, merchants would come to sell their wares, and allocations had to be made for space. Peace and order had to be maintained; someone had to be responsible for hospitality and the reception of distinguished visitors, and many arrangements had to be made for the temporary stage, for the accommodations of the actors and actresses, and a thousand other things. A meeting was held in the school-house to divide up the work and responsibilities, but actually the duties were assigned by the Elder. The stage was to be in the school compound; the place had to be cleared and structures put up. Chuan Fei the smuggler was to take care of the soldiers and the police. In fact, he had asked for that particular assignment. He always ran a gambling place on

such occasions, and it would be in the natural course of his duties to deal with the officers. He would actually be under their protection and the gamblers had nothing to worry about. On such occasions, the Widow would hold religious services at her home and collect money from the believers, but she had just had one and, with her tact, she refrained this time.

The busiest person was Hullo Chuan. Besides running about to get the poles and planks for the stage and clay bricks to build the actors' kitchens, his greatest responsibility was to provide for the transportation of the actors and their property. He had to get a minimum of eight carts, for the theatrical properties came in big, heavy trunks, and for each cart he had to have a team of five animals. These had to be loaned or hired from the neighbourhood, and at harvest time the farmers could ill spare their animals. But Hullo Chuan, with his good cheer and friendliness, had a knack of persuading the peasants to give for the common good, though not without running hither and thither for miles on end to assemble the teams. He sighed to think of the good old days when he had been able to arrange teams of uniform colour, one of white, another of black and tan, another of spattered grey, and another with white noses. It had been a sight

of which the village was very proud. But now he was satisfied with what he could get by putting together a motley company of geldings and mares and mares and mules and even cows. This done, the Elder asked him to send invitations to the elders and gentry of the neighbouring villages.

The sleepy village suddenly sprang to life. Every home was busy cleaning up the harvest, brightening the kitchen, and grinding flour to make noodles for the guests. Even the idlest members of the community, the Widow's daughters, were busy with starching their dresses and attending to their cosmetics.

The day finally arrived. At dawn, the big carts arrived with the entire troupe. The whole village turned out to watch the long procession of carts and horses, with horses neighing, drivers hollering, and people rushing to and fro. The actors, exhausted after the night-long journey, went with their hand packages straight to the school to have some sleep. They had started immediately after their performance of the previous night and had ridden thirty miles in those rumbling carts all night until their bodies were all shaken loose and limp. The cart containing the nuns was completely surrounded by the young people. Tientien Ni'rh pushed her way through the men, shouting and calling, until

she succeeded in escorting the nuns out of the cordon of men and brought them to her home.

The Widow's home was now like a beehive, for when actresses appear in the country, they are like queen bees, always surrounded by a bodyguard of the males. The village dandies stood around to offer their help and volunteer comments free of charge.

The nuns had taken off their long gowns. They wore pink jackets and were rolling up their sleeves to wash themselves. The young rowdies at the back pushed those in front, and elbowed and sang and swung in great glee, several times almost crushing a young nun. She turned around and scolded them for being greenhorns who had never seen the city.

“Of course you have!” replied some young man. “Say, how do you like serving men at the public baths!”

“Get out all of you, or I will throw water!” shouted Tientien Ni’rh. It was not a threat, but a simple declaration of intention. Without further ado, she poured a basin of dirty water on the laughing and shouting crowd. Far from being discomfited, the young dandies took the douche like holy water sprayed by the Goddess of Mercy from the sky, and apparently enjoyed it. It looked as if the young nun could win any election with these

ardent supporters of hers if she had cared to run for an office. At this moment, the Widow returned from her all-night gambling, and with a big shout sent them all away. Only then were the nuns able to wash themselves in peace.

The Elder's labourer had spoken to his master about leaving, but had been persuaded to drive a team of horses to bring the actors to the village. As soon as he had come back, he went to his employer's house, took a package of clothing, and, rolling it under his arm, told the Elder that he was leaving now.

“Why, you idiot! Don't you see we are busy with all this going on! I need you just these days. You have my permission to leave after the theatre is over.”

The labourer scanned his master with a hostile look and without a word of reply walked out of the house. Later in the day the Elder found him loitering around the village and asked him in surprise,

“I thought you were leaving. You are still here?”

“Why can't I? It is none of your business. I want to see the play, too.”

Hullo Chuan had come back with the actors and, after seeing the men actors to the school, went to the tea-house to wash himself and have his break-

fast. As soon as he entered, the owner told him, "Shih San-pao died last night, out of grief and anger and shame."

Hullo Chuan stamped his feet and at once made for Little Tiger's home. He paid his respects to the dead, but he was so sick of the brothers for being such helpless fools that he had nothing to say to them.

"I never saw such worthless people. You don't know how to help them or even to pity them," he said to himself as he came out. He went to give the buffalo his morning feed. The animal gave him a welcome by blowing a long breath at him.

"I haven't seen you for a long time," said Hullo Chuan to the animal. "Sorry, old friend, I have been so busy. You must have seen a lot of ridiculous things in this village in these two days since you arrived. Tell me, friend, can you see a single good person in this village, or anyone who is happy here? Go home south, my friend. It is too dry for you up here." He patted the buffalo's back like an old friend, and brushed him gently with his hand.

The theatrical performances began in the afternoon and lasted till midnight. The school compound was solidly packed as if the whole village community had been compressed into those few acres of space. Only a few stray dogs could be seen

prowling in the empty streets with closed doors.

A special stand had been erected for the distinguished visitors. After supper, toward nine o'clock, the War Hero, the Elder, and some invited guests took their seats in the stand. The War Hero was not interested in watching the play, although he had loved the theatre as a boy. The noise and the crowd made him uncomfortable, especially when he found that he, not the god of pestilence nor the god of rain, was the occasion for the play and the object of public attention.

"Have I changed, or has my home village changed?" he thought to himself. He thought of his mother, whose grave he had not even seen, and of his childhood. The villagers were ignorant and superstitious; they had no education and no knowledge of sanitation. He did not like the street fight of Tientien Ni'rh and the cuffing and cursing of the Elder, especially his kicking the poor labourer. Only two things slightly pleased him. One was the running out of town of his blackguard uncle, and the other was seeing the Widow again and finding her hale and hearty as ever. He had come to only one conclusion, and that was that the village needed a good water supply system.

Suddenly the Elder heard the Captain's laughter, and thinking he was enjoying the play, laughed with

him. He turned around and saw that the Captain was laughing in his sleep. For the Captain was having a dream. He saw Hullo Chuan drilling a group of men and women and children in a big, open field. Among the group he could recognise his own mother, the five daughters of the Widow, the Elder's whole family, Chuan Fei the smuggler, and himself and his boyhood friends. He wondered why everybody obeyed Hullo Chuan's command, and why it seemed that everybody had lost his "heart", and was wandering and marching back and forth for no purpose, like himself. His best boyhood friend Little Swallow, who was dead, presented him with a real pulsating heart, and he received it and put it in his coat pocket. He took down his artificial arm and presented it to everybody, but nobody wanted it. This made him shed tears. The dream went on and on. . . .

Suddenly the Captain waked up and heard a general cry, "Fire! Fire!"

The Elder was rushing out of the stand so fast that he had almost knocked down the Captain's artificial arm and waked him up.

"What is it?" asked the Captain, rubbing his eyes and yawning.

"My house is on fire!" replied the Elder as he hurried away.

From the stand the Captain saw a huge column of billowing black smoke with a reddish glow in the centre flaming up now and then, shooting up bright sparks.

The singing on the stage went on, hardly audible above the noise and confusion. The crowd was churning about. The neighbours rushed out to fight the fire, led by Hullo Chuan and a group of young men.

After half an hour the fire was brought under control, and the villagers gradually straggled back to watch the show. People were talking excitedly. The young nun was singing the last scene of the play, "Mortal Thoughts of a Nun." Between her lines, she heard someone near-by saying something about Tientien Ni'rh, and thought that she was burned to death. Restraining herself with great effort, she went through the last passage.

I'll leave the drums,
I'll leave the bells,
And the chants,
And the yells,
And all this interminable, exasperating
religious chatter!
I'll go down the hill and find me a young
and handsome lover—

Let him scold me, beat me!
Kick or ill-treat me!
I will *not* become a buddha!

No sooner had she finished than she shouted from the stage, "What has happened to Tientien Ni'rh?"

"Tientien Ni'rh has been kidnapped!"

"Oh, heaven!" the young nun screamed and dashed off the stage.

Captain Chuan had returned to the ancestral temple where he watched the fire gradually subsiding until the redolent sky and the trees in the neighbourhood of the Elder's house were again lost in the general darkness.

He saw Hullo Chuan limping toward him, out of breath, with perspiration shining on his face and his naked chest. While a dozen steps away, Hullo Chuan called out excitedly, "Big Wu, your water buffalo is safe!"

"Hullo Chuan, what has happened?"

The Captain saw a big red patch on his bare knee, and blood trickling down his calf. "You are hurt?" he asked.

Ignoring his question, Hullo Chuan said, panting, "Big Wu, you know what has happened? Tientien Ni'rh has been kidnapped! The Widow came running to tell us when the fire was dying down.

She looked all of a sudden ten years older. Tientien Ni'rh is nowhere to be found. And the labourer is gone, too. But, Big Wu, your water buffalo is safe. I saw him just a moment ago."

"But you are hurt," remarked the Captain. "Let me see. Sit down. Your knee is still bleeding."

"Oh, that's nothing. It's only a scratch. Big Wu, let me tell you something. The water buffalo is too good for this village. You take him down south where he will be happy again."

"You are wonderful, Hullo Chuan!"

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